

PULSE POUNDING

no.1

\$4

Adventure

Stories



In this issue
"INTRIGUE IN KURDISTAN"
by Robert E. Howard

El Borak
John Gorman

PULSE POUNDING ADVENTURE STORIES

December 1986

0008000

Number One

CONTENTS

Editorial	2
Intrigue in Kurdistan	3
By Robert E. Howard	
The Blade of the Slayer	11
By Richard L. Tierney	
The Dark Circle	24
By Carl Jacobi	
Drums of the Bizango	31
By Marc A. Cerasini and Charles Hoffman	
The Love of Oloana	42
By Manly Wade Wellman	

Editorial

This was Carl Jacobi's idea. A couple of years back, the pulster par excellence wrote suggesting, "I would like to see the Price magazines include a pulp revival of adventure fiction, stories of the type that filled the pages of Short Stories, Adventure, Thrilling Adventures, etc." One afternoon soon afterward, Lin Carter chanced to muse that a great pulp title would be "Pulse-Pounding Adventure Stories." It seemed to me as if the magazine were coming together of itself, so, obedient to fate, I began to collect and solicit just the right tales. The result is the present Pulse-Pounding Adventure Stories #1.

You will find yourself transported to a variety of times and climes, but common to all the stories is the authentic feel of the adventure pulps. Leading off the issue (and who better?) is Robert E. Howard with an unfinished tale of Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak, "Intrigue In Kurdistan." Actually Howard left quite a number of unfinished El Borak stories, another of which will appear next issue. (The rest we plan on collecting in two booklets later in 1987 or early 1988.)

Simon of Gitta returns in "Blade of the Slayer," another atmospheric action tale of swords and sorcery by Richard L. Tierney, chronicler of Red Sonja, time traveller John Taggart, and others. Next up you'll find Carl Jacobi's "The Dark Circle," a story of pearl-diving and perfidy in the South Seas. (You didn't think we'd let him off with only suggesting the magazine, did you?) This tale was written back in the late 30s as "The Black Circle" but surprisingly met with no

success at South Sea Stories, Short Stories and Argosy, even after being shortened to its present length and retitled. Their loss is our gain.

American adventurer John Gorman, as most readers will recognize, was sired but shortly orphaned by Robert E. Howard, then adopted by Howard devotees Marc A. Cerasini and Charles Hoffman (editors of Cromlech: The Journal of Robert E. Howard Criticism and authors of the soon-forthcoming Starmont Reader's Guide to Robert E. Howard). You are used to seeing Gorman's exploits in the pages of our sister title Risque stories, but it seems Gorman wanders not only from continent to continent but even from magazine to magazine! You will enjoy him in "Drums of the Bizango."

We saved "The Love of Oloana" for last. It is one of many unpublished manuscripts by the recently deceased Manley Wade Wellman. When the pulp giants like Wellman and Howard leave behind a legacy of such manuscripts, we feel like beneficiaries to a generous will. This issue's posthumously published tale is an early account of the caveman hero Hok, whom Wellman imagined as the real prototype for the Hercules myths and whose adventures seem to have been the unacknowledged prototype for the movie One Million Years BC as well. Though some of the Hok stories were published in the pulps, this one was unsuccessfully submitted to Spicy-Adventure Stories in 1935.

Next issue we'll be back with more from Howard, Jacobi, Wellman, Robert Bloch, and others. Till then, how's your blood pressure?

Robert M. Price, Editor

Intrigue in Kurdistan

By Robert E. Howard

The Turk gazed at the prisoner before him. In that gaze were anger and hate and some wonder. At least there was no contempt.

The prisoner met his gaze levelly. There was no fear in his black eyes. His arms were bound behind him and on each side stood an armed Turkish soldier.

Here and there about the great room soldiers stood and some civilians, all eyeing the prisoner with interest.

The Turk in the throne-like chair was a bold man but he found it difficult to meet those black eyes.

"He fought strongly, you say?" he asked.

"Aye, your Excellency," a Turkish officer answered. "He fought first with rifle and pistol and then with scimitar and dagger. When we finally took him, my lord, the dead men were piled high about him and in the taking he slew a man with his bare hands."

"Where is the Kurd that told you of him?"

"Here, my lord." An eagle-eyed, hook nosed tribesman clothed in ragged robes was led forward.

"Tell your tale."

"My lord," the Kurd began, casting a rather apprehensive glance toward the prisoner, "this man came amongst us and in a short time gained influence over some of the tribes. Then he spoke of a united Kurdistan that should lead all Islam. He said he would lead us to victory against the Turks and--"

"Go on," as the man hesitated.

"He said he would build an empire on the ruins of Turkey, that if the Kurds would follow him and shatter the power of Turkey, he would make Kurdistan a great nation. But there be many who like him not and I thought of the gold I might earn so I came to the officer Hassan and told him and he took a troupe of cavalry and

captured the Feringi. But as yet I have not been paid."

"Is this true?" asked the Turk, turning to the officer.

"Yes, my lord. The Kurds fled our coming and would not aid the Feringi but on the other hand they would not aid us, not even those we took with us."

"What are you? An Englishman?" asked the Turk, addressing the prisoner.

"An American," was the reply in faultless Turkish.

"What is your name?"

"Frank Gordon."

The Turk looked with new interest.

"It cannot be that--yet he is an American--. Are you he whom the Arabs call 'El Borak'?"

"Yes."

"It is truth, your Excellency," interposed the officer, Hassan. "That is what the Kurds said when they saw him."

The Turk's eyes narrowed. He seemed on the point of saying something and then changed his mind.

"You heard the Kurd's accusation," he said. "What have you to say?"

"Nothing against the charge," answered Gordon.

"You admit to having tried to stir up the tribes."

"Yes."

The Turk was puzzled.

"You know what to expect? Yet you make no defense."

"Yes, I know what to expect," the American answered, sardonically. "I know the Turk, Kemul Bey, and that is why I make no defense. I argue with Turks with steel, not with words."

Kemul Bey scowled.

"High words from a prisoner," he said, menacingly. "You are in no position to be haughty."

Gordon merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Why did you seek to lead the tribes against us?" asked the Turk, curiously. "Our countries are not at war."

"There is always war between the Turk and I," Gordon answered. "If you seek the cause, go to Armenia, to Palestine, to Greece. For burned cities, for murdered children, for unarmed men massacred, for the raping of girls and the enslaving of women, Turkey is my foe. And she or I shall fall."

The Turk listened silently to Gordon's speech, given in rather stilted Turkish.

"You rate yourself highly," he said, drily. "What do you hope to do against the great Turkish empire? What is your power?"

"Ask the men of Oman," Gordon replied, rather indifferently. "Ask the Amir of Afghanistan. Ask this Kurd."

The Turk turned to the tribesman.

"Do you know this man well?"

"Fairly well, my lord."

"Had you seen him or heard of him before he came to Kurdistan?"

"Yes, my lord. Some years ago he led a band of raiders into Kurdistan. He smote many tribes and burned many villages, both in the mountains and on the plains."

"Raiders? Of what race?"

"They were Afghans, my lord."

"Afghans?" The Turk exclaimed incredulously. "It is a far cry from Afghanistan to Kurdistan."

"Aye, my lord, but El Borak can lead men around the world. He is a devil. No man can stand before him in battle and when he leads men, the devils enter into them so that they follow where e'er he leads and perform wonders at his word."

"But if Gordon has raided the Kurds, why did the Kurds receive him as a friend?"

"They did not receive him as a friend, my lord. They feared him, and--and--"

"Well?"

"There be some chiefs among the Kurds who lust for power and loot and it is well known that men gain those things, who follow El

Borak."

The Turk's gaze wandered back to Gordon.

"Place him in one of the strongest dungeons," he said.

The Turks stepped back and signed Gordon to walk ahead.

Out of the great room, into a corridor, up a winding stair and down another corridor, lined on each side by cells with steel or iron doors. One of these the Turks stopped before and opening the heavy iron door, drove Gordon into the cell. Then they locked and bolted the door and one of them stood before it, with his rifle.

Inside the cell, Gordon worked at his bonds and soon freed his hands.

Then he inspected his cell. Except for a rude iron bench there were no furnishings. The floor, walls and ceiling were of stone. Some ten feet above the floor there was a small window, heavily barred, and there was a still smaller window in the iron door.

Gordon stepped upon the bench and leaped lithely to the window above. Catching the bars with both hands and drawing himself up, he peered out. The cell was not on the top floor of the castle but it was high. From the window to the ground was a distance of fully fifty feet. The castle-wall was straight up and down and afforded no holds for climbing, even if he could pry the window bars apart and climb through the window.

The building was an old castle, erected by some feudal Saracen lord of ancient times and was being used by the Turks as a fort.

There was a high stone wall around the massive building and outside of the wall a moat encircled both wall and castle. Turkish soldiers patrolled the wall.

"They think they have me this time," Gordon thought. Evidently if that was the belief of the Turks, Gordon did not agree for he smiled as he looked about his prison. He had received a few sword-cuts in the battle in which he had been captured but they were slight and

did not trouble him.

He examined the iron bench. It was a massive affair, made so to prevent prisoners using it as a means to escape, for it was far beyond the power of an ordinary man to lift such a bench.

Gordon, however, was no ordinary man. He was of medium height and of wiry frame but his strength was astonishing.

He felt sure he could employ the bench to smash the door of the cell, but he did not wish to do that. Battering down an iron door with an iron bench would make a terrific din that would bring some two hundred Turkish soldiers to prevent his escape. He crossed the cell and came close to the window in the door. The soldier stood close to the door, his rifle in his hands. Gordon passed his arm between the bars. So noiselessly he moved that the first thing the Turk knew of his attack was when a slim but sinewy hand gripped him by the hair and jerked his head back against the wall. He sagged down, unconscious.

Holding the Turk up against the door with one hand, Gordon attempted to get his other hand through the window. Impossible; the window was too small and the bars too thick. Gordon desisted and looked into the corridor again. The soldier's rifle had fallen from his hand so that the stock rested on the floor and the muzzle against the door, held in that position by the body of the unconscious Turk. Gordon measured the distance with his eye and then released the Turk, snatching at the rifle as it fell. He managed to catch it with his finger-tips and a second later drew it through the window.

Then he waited, watching the corridor. It was not long until a Turkish officer, making a round of inspection of the cells, came down the corridor.

He saw the unconscious Turk and stopped short, glancing about him.

Gordon called to him softly in Turkish.

The Turk glared in amazement as he saw Gordon gazing at him over the barrel of the rifle.

"Make no out-cry," the American instructed him. "Come forward with your hands up."

The Turk did so. He was one of those who had captured Gordon and he had no wish to be the target of the prisoner's skill of marksmanship, which was almost uncanny.

The Turk stopped within a few feet from the rifle muzzle.

"Now take the keys from that soldier's pocket," Gordon ordered. "You can do it with one hand."

Keeping a wary eye on the rifle, the Turk did as Gordon ordered.

"Now unlock this door and when it swings open don't try to run or try to draw a gun."

According to Gordon's instructions, the Turk stepped back, first pulling the unconscious soldier out of the way. In an instant Gordon was out of the cell. He searched the soldier and the officer, taking from the latter a pistol of Turkish manufacture. Then he forced the officer to enter the cell.

"Is Kemul Bey in this castle?" he asked.

"Yes," the Turk replied sullenly, "he is judging several Kurds who plotted rebellion."

"Are there any European prisoners in this castle?"

"I do not know."

Gordon looked at the Turk speculatively. "I ought to kill you," he said. "You are an arrogant, cruel, scoundrel; in other words, a Turk. However, I'm going to lock you up in this cell and leave you."

As he spoke, Gordon swung his left fist suddenly to the Turk's jaw. The Turk dropped, stunned. The American then turned his attention to the soldier, who was recovering consciousness. He bound both Turks hand and foot and gagged them, using the ropes he had been bound with and the soldier's jacket which he tore in strips. Then locking the cell door he slipped down the corridor, as swift and noiseless as a wraith. He came to another flight of stairs

leading upward and mounted them. He came into another corridor from which other corridors branched off bewilderingly. Gordon chuckled. The castle was undoubtedly one of the strangest forms of architecture he had ever seen. He ascribed it to the fact that the original building had been altered and changed by many conquerors to suit their needs.

Saracen, Seljuk, Crusader, Kurd and Turk had each in turn held sway, changing and adding to the castle.

A Turkish soldier, making the rounds of the cells, paused close to a dark side-corridor to light a cigarette, leaning his rifle against the wall. And from the corridor leaped a vaguely seen form and struck with bare fist, once. No need to strike more.

Gordon leaned above the soldier, listening. No sound. With swift, dexterous hands he searched the Turk. He found keys and a quantity of money but he took only the keys and a wicked appearing Turkish knife that was thrust into the Turk's sash. The rifle he left leaning against the wall.

Traversing corridor after corridor he finally decided to try some of the keys he had taken, on a chance that he would discover a way of escape. Selecting a door at random he found a key to fit the lock and opened the door with some difficulty. Entering, he found himself in a cell that apparently had not been used for many years. There was a small window, opening upon the court-yard, and an iron bench, as in the other cells. The bench was riveted to the floor. That fact aroused Gordon's interest.

"That bench is too heavy for a man to lift," he mused. "Why then should it be fastened to the floor?"

Gripping one end of the bench he tugged. The bench moved slightly! Desisting for a moment, Gordon examined the floor. It seemed to be formed of long, even slabs of stone and the bench rested upon a single slab. Seizing the bench again, Gordon exerted all

his strength. And the bench and the slab on which it rested, swung up until the bench rested on one end upon the floor. A stair-case was revealed.

"Crafty, by Erlik!" Gordon exclaimed in admiration. "One end of the slab is fastened to the rest of the floor with hinges. Raising the bench lifts the slab like a trap-door. Quite medieval, with a secret passage and hidden stair-way." The cell door locked from the inside as well as from the outside. Gordon locked it and stepped onto the stair-way, leaving the hidden door open. The stair went both up and down. Gordon went upward. After leaving the trap-door, the stair-way was quite dark and Gordon could feel the wall on both sides. He had known that both the outer and inner walls of the castle were very massive and thick and he was sure the stair-way had been built within a wall. Probably there were many secret ways in the castle. Gordon wondered if Kemul Bey was aware of the hidden stair-way. He doubted if any Turk knew of it. The dust was thick upon the steps and he knew it had not been used lately, probably not in many years.

Once or twice, feeling along the wall Gordon came upon what he believed were hidden doors of some sort, probably opening into some room or cell.

However, he made no attempt to open them.

Presently he came to what appeared the top of the stairs. It was dark but Gordon, standing erect, felt what seemed to be a stone roof. He pushed upward; felt it give slightly. He shoved with all his strength and the trap-door, for that was what it seemed to be, slid upward a few inches and then swung to one side, revealing a blue Asian sky. Springing up, Gordon caught the edge of the opening and drew himself. He peered out cautiously. He was on the roof of the castle. No one was in sight so he climbed out onto the roof.

Turreted battlements surmounted the castle-roof, which was composed

of square stone slabs. The hidden was a slab exactly like the other slabs on the surface. It was hung on sliding hinges and was opened by pushing from below. Shoved upward a few inches, it swung back on the hidden hinges like a trap-door. Gordon did not see how it could be opened from the top until upon closer examination he saw that the door-stone was raised slightly above the level of the roof and had faint grooves on two sides. Having examined the door, Gordon turned his attention to the castle roof. The roof itself was flat and at regular intervals rose a narrow tower, some ten in all. These rose sheer from the battlements and in ancient times were used as forts from which the castle-soldiers shot arrows and hurled missiles down upon besiegers. The Turks had mounted machine guns in the towers, which, levelled at an angle clearing the outer castle-wall, could sweep the space beyond the moat on all sides. Gordon knew at least two Turks were stationed in each tower.

The door of the secret stair was cunningly situated in the angle the rounded tower made with the battlement so that unless some one approached close to the battlements from the opposite direction, anyone coming from the hidden door would be unseen. Gordon was sure that Turkish soldiers patrolled the roof, however, so he was cautious.

He peered warily around the tower. He could hear the sibilant Turkish speech of the two soldiers stationed within the tower and he saw another Turk walking away. He carried a rifle and walked with measured stride, keeping close to the battlements. The Turkish sentry, making his rounds.

Gordon turned and looked over the battlements. The sun blazed down from a cloudless Asian sky. The small city huddled close to the great castle showed drab and unlovely. It was one of the furthest out-posts of Turkish rule in Asia.

Gordon turned his eyes from the crooked, narrow streets, lined with shops, and the bazaar, and gazed

out across the plain. To west and south the plain lay, level and bare, as far as eye could reach. But some miles to the north and the east the plain sloped up to meet the mountains that, bleak and gigantic, reared their mighty peaks to the sky.

Gordon gazed, meditatively. Among those mountains roamed tribes of savage warriors, mountain-Kurds, as fierce and cruel as the Afghans and nearly as war-like.

They had never acknowledged Turkish rule and it was against them that the old castle had been garrisoned and fortified. And Gordon had sought to unite those Kurds and hurl their full force against the Turks with torch and sword.

They imagined, the Kurds did, that Gordon desired to build an empire out of Kurdistan and make the Kurds supreme in Asia. Gordon smiled crookedly. His hatred of the Turks was equalled only by his hatred of the Kurds. All that he had desired was to cause the two nations, Turkey and Kurdistan, to go to war. With all the tribes of mountain-Kurds raiding the Turkish borders, together with their allies, the plains-Kurds, Turkey would be forced to send a large army into Kurdistan. Then, with the Turkish forces divided, if Gordon could convince some European nation, Turkey would be forced out of Europe and back into Asia.

Such was Gordon's dream but it seemed to him that it had come to naught. Gordon had come into the Kurdish mountains, alone and fearing nothing. He had come among the Kurds, neither as a captive nor an enemy. They knew El Borak of old and they feared and respected him. And he had begun at once to unite the chiefs and the tribes. The Kurds had distrusted him and some of the chiefs wished to murder him. But Gordon went his way, unperturbed, knowing that the Kurds would have slain him, had they dared. He had made no threats except once, when speaking in a council of chiefs, a Kurdish chieftain had threatened his life in veiled

words.

"Aye," Gordon had said, standing erect and fearless, his eyes sweeping the rows of chieftans, "slay me and Afghan raiders will drench the mountains in Kurdish blood."

And the chiefs whose eyes had met his, had lowered their gaze sullenly. Gordon was a power in Afghanistan and they knew it.

And then the Kurd had carried information to the Turks and Gordon had been captured.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "Ungrateful skates," he murmured whimsically and with mild sarcasm. He felt no especial enmity toward the Kurd who had been the cause of his capture. Treachery was a dominant characteristic of all Orientals, he knew; especially the Kurds.

He turned and let himself down upon the hidden stair-way, lowering the stone door into place with some difficulty, as he did so.

He descended the stair until, feeling along the walls, he came to what he believed was a secret door. He could hear a murmur of voices on the other side of the wall. Feeling in the dark he came upon a narrow strip of metal that seemed movable. It was rusted but Gordon tugged at it and it slid back in a groove, revealing a narrow slit in the hidden door, if such was what it was.

Gordon peered out. He was looking into a cell, in which sat two Kurds, arguing. They were two chiefs who had been arrested by the Turks as plotters. Gordon knew them both. One was quite a powerful chief, who had been prominent in opposing Gordon's plans of a united Kurdistan. His name was Abdullah Hassan and he was as cruel as he was bold. An arrogant, fiendishly cruel bandit chief whose murders and ravishings were numberless.

Gordon began to work noiselessly at the hidden door and presently found a rusted spring. A pressure upon the spring and he believed the door would open.

The Kurds had risen and were

striding about the cell, arguing with some heat. Abdullah Hassan stopped close to the door behind which Gordon stood. The other Kurd turned and gazed through the bars of the cell-door into the corridor.

Gordon pressed the spring. Silently the hidden door swung inward. The light that filtered through the bars of the cell glittered on Gordon's knife as he struck once. And Abdullah Hassan flung up his hands, swayed and pitched forward on his face without a sound.

The other Kurd turned at the sound of the fall; he saw a blank cell-wall and a cell empty except for himself and Abdullah Hassan, who lay, face down, a rent in the cloth of the burnoose between his wide shoulders.

The Turk patrolling the cells was startled by a commotion in one of the cells. Hurrying there he found a Kurd kicking and beating on the cell-door and on the bars and calling lustily on Allah and the Turkish soldiers and old heathen idols in the same breath. He was scared half out of his wits and desired to be placed in another cell.

"Why?" the Turk wanted to know.

"Why?" yelled the Kurd. "There lies Abdullah Hassan on the cell-floor, slain by a knife-thrust and no one in the cell but he and I! Mahommed akbar!"

The Turk glanced through the bars, saw the slain Kurd, and set off down the corridor at a swift pace, pursued by the maledictions of the other Kurd who called down upon him all the curses of Allah for leaving him in that place of devils.

The soldier soon returned with some more soldiers and an officer.

"It is quite plain," the Turkish officer said. "The men quarreled and Abdullah Hassan was slain by this other Kurd."

The Kurd cursed. "Fool!" he said heatedly. "Have I a knife? And even if I had could I overcome Abdullah Hassan, the curse of Allah upon him."

The Turkish officer ordered him seized and stripped but no weapon was either upon him or upon the body of Abdullah Hassan. Nor was any weapon found concealed in the cell. Nor was the hidden door discovered.

Gordon, meanwhile, was exploring the castle.

He discovered narrow corridors branching off from the stair-way, now and then and he followed one of them. After traversing it for a time, he again heard a murmur of voices, hunted and found a slot and drawing aside the sliding metal slip, found himself looking into the great room in which he had faced Kemul Bey. There were two great arches in the room, huge and massive, but entirely for ornamental purposes, it seemed. The hidden passage-way in which Gordon was in one of the arches. Half-way across the room was the throne-like chair where Kemul Bey sat. The Turk was sitting there even then, Gordon saw. Also there were a few Turkish soldiers about the room.

The American could hear their conversation plainly. Just then a Turkish officer entered to report that the Kurdish chief, Abdullah Hassan, had been murdered in his cell. The other Kurd who had occupied the same cell, was brought before Kemul Bey, who questioned him. The Kurd swore it was the work of ifreets.

And then came another Turk to report that a soldier had been found murdered in the upper corridors.

A Turkish surgeon was brought who informed Kemul Bey that the soldier had evidently been slain by a blow from a bare fist.

Kemul Bey mused upon the statement.

"By Allah," said the Turk, "I know of no man who could slay such a man as that soldier with his bare hands--except Gordon, whom they call El Borak."

A soldier rushed into the room.

"Your Excellency!" he shouted, "El Borak has escaped!"

Kemul Bey leaped from his throne.

"What! Ho! Mirza Sulieman, take fifty soldiers and search the castle. Throw a cordon about the walls and let no one leave the castle until Gordon is recaptured or slain."

Then to the soldier, "How did he escape?"

"Your Excellency," the soldier answered, "El Borak overpowered the sentry and taking his rifle from him, with it forced officer Nureddin to unlock the cell door. Soldiers coming to relieve the sentry found both the officer and sentry bound and gagged on the floor of the cell."

Kemul Bey rose and picked up his fez. The report of a pistol sent the echoes flying from walls to ceiling and the fez flew out of Kemul Bey's hand.

With a curse the Turk leaped back, snatching out a pistol. The soldiers started at the shot and raised their rifles. But they paused, uncertainly. There was nothing to tell them from whence the shot came. They stood, looking fearfully about the great castle-room.

"Gordon is in the castle somewhere," said Kemul Bey, somewhat recovering his poise. "Search the castle. Capture El Borak or slay him."

Gordon smiled as he slid the metal slide back in place. He was beginning to enjoy the game. To conceal himself in the very stronghold of his enemies, to match cunning with cunning and war with war, to deal swift death to his foes and to match his life against theirs, that was a game that gave Gordon the thrills he wished. And his foes were Turks and that pleased him also.

Coming to another hidden door, he opened it cautiously. It opened into a room so pitch dark that even Gordon's eyes could not penetrate the darkness. Presently he made out the faint outline of a door across the room. He stepped forward noiselessly and then crouched back against the wall, as he heard a slight sound in front of him. Then silence. Gordon crouched close to the wall, his bared, waiting,

listening.

A faint rustle of garments and Gordon leaped swift and noiseless as a panther, slashing savagely.

His knife touched something and someone cried out in a low voice. And Gordon jerked back in amazement. For the voice was that of a woman.

"Oh, spare me!" The words were in imperfect Turkish and full of fright and piteous appeal. "Oh, please! Would you murder me?"

Gordon groped in the dark and his hand touched a soft arm. He drew the woman toward him and felt her shudder with terror.

"Don't be afraid," he said softly, "I won't hurt you." He drew her toward the doorway. Some Kurdish woman, he imagined, or Armenian, either imprisoned because of some breaking some Turkish law or because she was the property of some officer. Even in the dark he could tell that she was young.

He stepped through the door-way into a room or cell dimly lighted by a barred window. Then he turned to look at his captive.

And Gordon dropped her arm and stared. For the woman was little more than a girl and she was white!

In spite of her tattered garments and white, terrified face on which were traces of weeping, she

was a very pretty girl, one of the prettiest Gordon had ever seen, with golden hair and soft, gray eyes.

When Gordon released her she shrank back, her arm thrown out as if to ward off a blow. But now as her eyes became accustomed to the light and she saw Gordon's European clothing and features, she started forward.

Her eyes were wide and a glad cry was on her lips.

"Oh, are you a European?" she cried in the language of Gordon's own land.

"I am an American, miss," he answered, "and I hope I can help you."

She threw herself into his arms and clung tightly to him, her slim body pressed close to his and her golden hair falling about his shoulders. Her slender body shook with sobs.

And Gordon held her to him, soothing her as one would soothe a little child. Presently her sobs ceased and she looked up, smiling through her tears.

"I'm a silly, hysterical goose," she said, half-laughing, half-crying, "but I've been so frightened."

"You poor child," Gordon said with some tenderness, "what are you doing in Kurdistan?"

Blade of the Slayer

By Richard L. Tierney

. . . by Heaven, which He holds, and the abyss,
And the immensity of worlds and life . . .
Homage he has from all--but none from me:
I battle it against him . . . till the great
Conflict shall cease, if ever it shall cease,
Which it ne'er shall, till he or I be quenched!
And what can quench our immortality,
Or mutual and irrevocable hate?

--Lucifer, in Lord Byron's Cain

A chill wind blew beneath gray skies, stirring the withered grasses and shrubs of the low ridge. Simon of Gitta brought his near-exhausted horse to a halt, gazed back intently eastward for a moment, then dismounted. His pursuers were not yet in sight, though he knew they could not be far behind--but up the slope, only a few hundred yards distant upon the horizon, jutted the silhouette of an odd-angled rock outcropping. With luck he could hide there, then steal away after dark toward the far plains of Sumer which lay lazily to the west.

Simon gave the horse a sharp slap on its right rear flank and it cantered wearily away at an angle, southwestward, down the hill. Then he began to hurry up the gradual slope, stepping from rock to rock whenever possible so as not to leave a trail, glancing frequently eastward, an anxious tension in his dark eyes.

Scarcely had he gained the rocks of the ridgetop before he saw them--the silhouettes of more than a dozen horsemen topping the horizon to the east. Quickly he eased himself down between two boulders, lips drawn back in an unconscious snarl, and watched them approach. His hand clutched for his sword-pommel, gripped only empty air. He cursed softly, regretting that he had ever allowed his bandit-captors to disarm him rather than fighting them to the death. True, he had later escaped those captors by means of the near-magical arts his Persian mentors had

taught him; but now he was a fleeing animal, the hunters upon his track. . . .

The horsemen galloped closer, their helmets, mail and spear-points glinting in the late-afternoon light. They drew abreast of their hidden quarry several hundred yards down the slope from him, then passed--following the trail of his abandoned mount, which had already vanished down into the draw and was, hopefully, hurrying westward in quest of the lush pastures of Sumer. Simon drew a deep breath, brushed sweat-dampened bangs of dark hair from his forehead, then slowly stood erect. Some of his tension ebbed away; his angular features relaxed a trifle, and he even felt grateful for the cold wind that whipped his black locks and the dark cloak that wrapped his tall frame. For a moment he stood in silence, watching as the last horsemen vanished down the draw to the southwest, while the dimming light of the west limned his craggy, clean-shaven features.

Then, shouldering his light pack again, he continued on to the highest crest of the ridge, where the odd-angled rocks clustered most thickly. Here he would sup on the last of his meagre fare, then continue on over the slope and down the next draw before his pursuers returned. Hopefully the abandoned mount would lead them on a long chase. . . .

Suddenly his musings were shattered as a tall, dark-robed figure rose up from the rocks, scarcely a

dozen paces ahead.

"Baal!" gasped Simon, again reaching instinctively for his missing sword. The dark figure began to move toward him. Grimly Simon crouched, assuming a fighting-stance his hated Roman trainers had once taught him.

The figure drew closer. Simon, seeing the stranger more clearly, relaxed a bit. It was an old man, tall and white-bearded, clad in a dark greenish robe inscribed with the symbols of the Persian Magi. Yet Simon remained alert, recalling tales he had heard of wizards who lurked amid these western foothills.

"Ho, stranger." The voice of the old man was nearly as thin as the cold wind. "Why come you here to the site of the City of the First Kingdom?"

"The--what?" Simon rose from his fighting-crouch and approached the old man cautiously. "What are you talking about--?"

"And have you not heard that the spirit of the Great Slayer, who founded that city, still lingers about this ridgetop, waiting for unwary strayers?"

Simon glanced about at the numerous worn boulders, at the sparse dry grasses blowing under the chill wind. "Aye, I've heard such tales. But, surely no city ever stood here --"

"The legend is true. No outsider is safe in this place. You must go."

Simon barked a derisive laugh. "Unsafe? Didn't you see that band of cutthroats riding by? They're after my hide, by Baal! I rode here in hopes that the local legends would deter them, but obviously they're not impressed. But don't worry, old man, I won't stay long--just until nightfall. Then I'll steal away down the ridgetop before the bastards return to search for my horse's missing rider. By dawn I should be well on my way toward the western plains."

"Do not delay, stranger. Go now."

"And risk having them return

and spot me on the open slopes of this ridge? No! Besides, I need a short rest and something to eat." Simon eyed the old man's robe, noting the numerous mystical symbols emblazoned upon it. "Why are you so anxious to see me gone? Your garb proclaims you a Magus and a servant of Ahura Mazda. Are you and your fellow sorcerers hiding some secret here?"

"No secret that you would care to know."

"Well, I don't care about your secrets, I assure you. Hide me for an hour, and I'll be on my way. Surely you must have a hiding-place among these rocks--a cave, perhaps? An old man like you does not live perpetually exposed to winter winds upon a ridgetop."

The mage nodded slightly. "Come, then."

Simon followed him a short distance to a huge fractured outcrop surrounded by many toppled boulders, then into one of its narrow fissures. Just before they entered Simon glimpsed a large vulture, perched atop the outcropping, watching them with a beady eye. Uneasily he wondered why the bird did not fly away, then realized that it was no doubt the old man's familiar--for Simon knew that many Persian magi kept such birds, sacred to Ahura Mazda, as servitors.

After a few paces the twisting crevice ended at a black hole that slanted shallowly downward. They entered, and Simon noted that the walls and ceiling of this narrow passage, though extremely pitted, were straight and regular as if artificially carved. Beneath his feet were stone stairsteps, so worn and curved in the middle that they formed almost a chute upon whose surface he had to advance with caution. Then the gray daylight faded, but ahead Simon caught the dim gleam of torchlight. In another moment he and his aged guide had emerged into a small room carved from the living rock and meagerly furnished with a cot, a wooden table and two stools. Upon the table, gleaming in the light of the single

wall-bracketed torch, stood many vials, bottles, mixing bowls and metal implements, while beneath it in the shadows rested a box full of scrolls. Nearby stood a brazier upon a bronze tripod, and against one wall a small cabinet whose open door revealed many more bottles and vials.

"Sit, and eat," muttered the old man, clearing a corner of the table. "Then, you must go. My spells protect me from the Slayer's spirit, but they will not protect you after darkness falls."

Simon snorted derisively as he set down his pack. "Ha! You are hiding something. I'm not an ordinary outlander to be easily fooled by such tales, old man. Look." He let his dark cloak fall open and slip from his shoulders to the floor. "You see--I, too, have been trained in magical arts by Persia's very own Magi."

The old man peered closely at the red-brown tunic emblazoned with yellow symbols, some of them similar to those on his own robe. The man who wore it was young, tall and lean, hard-muscled. He wore a leather sword-belt, but the scabbards for sword and dagger were empty.

"Aye, I know you now," said the oldster, his manner becoming a bit less suspicious. "You are Simon of Gitta, a pupil of the Archimage Daramos. I saw you several months ago, when I and several other priests of my order visited Daramos in Persepolis. Daramos mentioned to us that you were his most accomplished adept."

Simon, too, relaxed a bit more. "Thank you. But your memory is better than mine. I recall your visit, but not your name--"

"I am K'shasthra, priest of the Order of the High Guardians. At least one adept of our Order is always stationed here to guard the secret that . . . that for now must be kept from mankind. We have kept guard thusly for nearly two years. So much I may reveal to you, who have already been initiated into many secrets of the Magi.

Perhaps I shall tell you more--but only with the understanding that the outer world must never know, until the Order has decided that the time is right."

"I see." Simon placed his small bundle of rations on the table, then sat down and unwrapped them. "And so you have no doubt spread these tales of the 'Slayer' to frighten off unwanted visitors?"

"We did not invent the legend," said K'shasthra, "though I admit that we have revived and enhanced it of late. The Great Slayer's spirit does not truly prowl here--but we have seen to it that a few venturesome, prying ones have vanished, to turn up later as unmarked corpses near the closest caravan-trails. Of late we have not had to use such tactics; you are the first visitor to come here for many months."

Simon felt a tingling along his spine. "And had I been an ordinary outlander--?"

K'shasthra smiled thinly. "It is well that you revealed to me your identity when you did." He turned away and rummaged amid a shadowy bundle of blankets near the cot. Simon scowled with dark understanding. He of all people knew what powders and poisons could be used by the Magi to induce death with no apparent cause.

The old man returned and set bread, dried meat and a flask of wine on the table. "Do not be disturbed, Simon. When you learn more, you will understand why such extreme methods were necessary. What we do is for the good of all mankind."

Simon nodded, but when he ate it was from his own rations, washing down each dry mouthful with a sip from his own water-skin. Not until the old mage had eaten several bites from the loaf and the dried meat, and taken a few swallows from the wine-flask, did Simon join him in sampling this more palatable fare. K'shasthra smiled again at the suspicion in the young man's dark, deep-shadowed eyes.

"Have no fear, Simon. I swear

by Ahura Mazda, and by his fire-servant Atar, that I intend you no evil. But, tell me how you happen to come--and in the cold of winter at that--to this desolate ridgetop."

"I joined a small caravan journeying from Persepolis to Susa. We were attacked last evening by more than a score of bandits, and I was captured." Simon's gaze became somber, introspective. "They left me bound to die upon a snow-slope in the cold; that was in punishment for having fought them well enough to leave several of their number dead. I had to watch while they murdered all the men and children; then they raped the women and slew them also. But in the night I slipped my bonds and stole a horse from the very edge of the bandits' camp, leaving two more of their guards dead behind me. Too bad I had no time to snatch their weapons! --the rest were instantly after me like a pack of wolves--but at least there were a few provisions bundled in a cloak on the horse. I gave the bastards the slip, but they weren't long in getting on my trail, and ever since dawn they've been slowly gaining. I suppose they know this region intimately--and your 'Slayer' legend doesn't seem to impress them."

K'shasthra frowned thoughtfully. "That would be Gutakh and his Mailed Raiders. I've heard of their bloody deeds, but never have they or any other bandit-gangs ventured this far from the caravan-trails. I saw but sixteen horsemen pass here, Simon--evidently you thinned their ranks considerably. No wonder they burn for revenge! Daramos has obviously taught you well."

"He taught me escape-artistry and many other things," said Simon, his eyes more darkly brooding than ever, "but it was the Romans who trained me to fight and kill. They plundered my home in Samaria, slew my parents and sold me into the arena, where for two years as a gladiator I entertained them by spilling blood."

"I remember the story now," said the old man. "Your first men-

tor, Dositheus the Samaritan, helped you escape and brought you here to Persia to study under his own former mentor, Daramos. That was four years ago, was it not? And why do you now journey toward Susa, braving bandits and these wintry foothills?"

"I go to Rome."

"Ah." K'shasthra nodded. "I understand. You feel that your arcane studies here have given you greater powers, and now you would return and use those powers for--revenge?"

Simon did not reply, but a deep hatred glowered from the torchlight-shadowed pits of his eyes.

"I understand well," the mage went on. "Your feelings make you worthy of our Order's confidence. You shall learn the secret that we have not confided even to Daramos or Dositheus--and they you shall learn even greater skills and powers, that you may aid us in our plan to bring benefit to all mankind."

"Aid you?" Simon shook his head. "No, I'm not interested in your secrets and plans. I must go to Rome."

"And so you shall, if you wish--but if you decide to join us in our cause, your power and vengeance can be all the greater. Do not adamantly refuse me before you know what I offer. Come, Simon, follow me."

The old man had risen while he spoke, and now he took the torch from its bracket and moved toward a corner of the room where a tattered blanket hung. Simon rose also, then scowled with surprise as K'shasthra pushed the blanket aside, revealing a tall, black aperture perhaps two feet wide.

"Come--follow," the mage repeated.

Simon did so. The blanket fell back into place behind them and the torch revealed a narrow passage. After a few paces they began to descend another stairway, this one longer and steeper but less worn than the last, and curving slightly to the right. After what Simon es-

timated to be about a quarter-turn, the passage abruptly opened into a large empty space. The light of the old man's torch feebly illuminated a vast chamber which appeared to be circular and domed.

"Wait here, near the wall," instructed the mage, who then began to walk around the huge room, lighting a wall-torch every few yards. As the illumination increased Simon became aware of a wide, circular pit whose edge was about thirty feet in from the wall. It seemed to be filled with dark water nearly to the rim.

"This was the water-storage chamber of the City of the First Kingdom," explained K'shasthra as he completed the circuit. "It is all that remains of that place, save for my chamber and the wind-worn boulders you saw atop the ridge."

"Gods!" muttered Simon. How many thousands of years would it take for the wind to thus reduce the stones of--"An entire city?"

"By today's standards, more like a small town. Actually it was a walled fortress, founded by the Great Slayer in his lust for dominion. He made it his seat of power here in Elam, his First Kingdom, and it was here that he gathered and trained his first armies. Then, in his lust to extend his power over all men and all gods, he marched forth into Sumer and waged the wars that ended in establishing his First Empire."

A prickling crawled down Simon's spine as understanding began to dawn. His throat felt suddenly dry. He dared not speak.

"But in time he came under the curse of the world-creator Omidom," K'shasthra went on, "--that greatest of the Primal Gods who fashioned the First Men to serve them. For the Slayer excelled all men not only in arms, hunting-skills and warfare, but in blasphemous pride and defiance as well. Though he founded nations and built many great cities, erecting in them great towers and temples to himself, this was not enough. Eventually he delved into mighty sorceries and spiritually

ascended to the sacred realms of the gods themselves, taking by storm a portion of the Tree of Life itself--the blessing and curse of a millennium-spanning longevity.

"For his rebellion the Slayer, though he reigned long, was finally deposed by his rebellious followers and doomed to wander over the earth, hating and slaying, forever fomenting new wars and rebellions, spreading new hatred and death. Since then he has many times gained and lost the reins of power. He founded Kalakh and Uruk and many other cities. He has ruled in Sumer and Akkad and Assur under many names; he has won and lost many lesser kingdoms during his god-cursed wanderings. Once, ironically, he was defeated by a king who ruled this very land which was the Slayer's first kingdom."

"You mean," gasped Simon, "--this place was--the Eyrie of Elam? And that your 'Slayer' was even him who warred with Chedorlaomer the King. . .?"

"I see that you have read Ostanian as well as your own Samaritan legends," said the wizard. "The tales of many vanished races--all of them more or less inaccurate--have called the Slayer by many names, have even on occasion made him out to be a god or semi-divine hero. To the Sumerians he became the war-god Nimurta, while the Babylonians confused some of his exploits with those of their legendary wanderer-king Gilgamesh. For to this day the Slayer does wander--cursed and vengeful, mortal yet undying."

"To this day?" Simon shook his head. "Such cannot be. Besides, there are legends of his death. Some say he was slain by King Esau of Edom, others that he died lingeringly as insects ate into his brain. . . ."

"Aye, the legends are many and contradictory--mere wishful thinking on the part of those who composed them, no doubt. Yet nowhere but in the centuried book of Ostanian, once Persia's greatest mage, have there been recorded

traditions that are at all close to the source--and even these traditions date from many centuries after the Slayer began to stalk the earth. Surely you recall from Ostanos, Simon, how that rebellious one invoked monstrous ancient beings--Kutugha, Rebothoth and Great Tukultu--to aid him in his assault on their enemies the Primal Gods? And surely you must also remember these lines derived from the impious pre-Sumerian poet Naru-nimurut?"

So saying, K'shasthra began to recite from memory in an ancient Persian dialect:

"Great Omidom, the star-throned,
chose to shape

An earthly race, fashioned in his
own form,

To worship him in cringing servitude.

These fecund lice soon swarmed
through all the lands,

Then died by droves at their fell
Master's whim

In earthquakes, floods and cataclysms vast

Whose thunders were the echoed
laughter of

Great Omidom and all the Primal
Gods.

Yet one survivor, in defiant hate,
Rose up and vowed to serve no
gods so vile.

No insect he, in cosmic mire
a-writhe,

But a fierce tiger filled with hellish
wrath!

Freedom he grasped, defying the
mad gods,

Leading his conquering armies
through the lands,

Founding great cities, building
nations vast,

Slaying the great gods' fawning
servitors,

Rearing huge towers upon whose
lofty heights

His own great stone-hewn image
stood upright,

Worshipped as Deity, with sword
upraised--

A brazen finger at the throat of
God.

And finally, with sorceries unmatched,

He stormed the throne of Heaven
and stole its prize--

Knowledge and power withheld by
gods from men.

Now in huge wrath Great Omidom
recoiled,

Seeing his mirrored arrogance and
pride

Within his own created, cherished
thralls.

Then the defiant one who cursed
in rage

To endless wanderings and constant
strife. . . ."

"Enough!" Simon gestured impatiently. "Yes, I've read it. It's an old Persian variant of a poem reputed to have been composed thousands of years ago in a tongue now forgotten. But surely you can't expect me to believe that--?"

"Believe only what you see, Simon," said K'shasthra. "Come--let us look into the pool."

He moved slowly forward behind the wizard, curious yet at the same time strangely reluctant. K'shasthra stopped at the edge of the pit, held his torch out and leaned slightly forward, peering down. As Simon drew near the edge of the wide pool, which was perhaps forty feet from rim to rim, he was surprised to realize that the dark substance filling it could not be water, for it held no reflection at all, neither of the torches nor of the surrounding walls. Moreover, its surface had a hazy aspect, as if it mingled slightly with the air just above it. Nearby, just beneath that surface, was a small platform from which a stone stairway began to spiral downward along the curved wall.

"Look down, Simon, and tell me what you see."

Keeping a distance between himself and the mage, Simon knelt and peered over the edge of the pit. Despite the dark vapor that filled it, he was surprised to find that he could see clearly to the bottom--a depth about equal to the height of three tall men. In the middle of the circular floor was a raised rect-

angular dais of stone--and upon it, pale in contrast to the surrounding darkness, lay the body of a man.

"What do you see, Simon?"

He could not reply. A strange fascination had gripped him. The body on the dais seemed unusually tall, though Simon could not be sure because of its powerful, well-proportioned muscularity. It was not the massive build of a wrestler or a dwarf; rather, it suggested the godlike solidity of a mighty Hercules. The torso and upper thighs were cased in a sleeveless tunic of tight-fitting Persian mail over which was laced a ragged leathern vest; the mighty limbs were bare, save for stout sandals whose thongs criss-crossed the lower legs. About the waist was cinched a wide sword-belt from which a long sheath depended, angled so that it lay partly beneath the tall muscular body. From this sheath protruded the handle of a sword that seemed, from the little that Simon could see, to be of archaic design.

But it was the face that held Simon's fascination most intensely--the dark, hook-nosed, arrogant face that even in death seemed tensed--or ready to tense--into a snarl of menace. Blue-black shoulder-length hair and a curling black beard framed those menacing features. . . .

Simon suddenly felt a strange fear--What if those death-closed eyes should open?--and immediately he drew back from the pit.

"That is the Slayer," said K'shasthra calmly. "For thousands of years he has wandered over the earth in many guises--nomadic hunter, brigand, warrior, conquerer and king--spreading his hatred and evil among men. Many kingdoms and empires has he founded, ruled and lost, but always he somehow rises anew to power under another name. He has led brigands and rebels, forged armies and commanded conquering hosts. Always he stirs men up to commit pillage, rapine and war, to overthrow any power but his own--even that of the gods. Such is the scope of his superhuman

evil.

"But two years ago we of the Order of the High Guardians, resolving to purge humanity of the Slayer's curse, drew him here to this region by means of spells and illusions, and then trapped him in this pit."

"But. . . ." Simon found it hard to speak. "How. . . .?"

"Even the Great Slayer has his human weakness. Once in his remote youth he loved a woman--Inanna by name--by whom he sired the line who ruled the First Kingdom he founded. Inanna shared his pride and love of dominion, and when at last the Primal Gods slew her for her Iniquity, her lord caused her name to be deified. Now we of the Order, by means of magical rites culled from books far more ancient than even that of Ostanès, were able to project into the Slayer's dreams the ghostly beckoning form of this woman, and so we drew him back to this region--and eventually, with the aid of certain of his fellow-roguers who betrayed him, even into this pit. Then we cast the spells that bound him, and released into the dry cistern the deadly murk that now surrounds him. Look, Simon." K'shasthra knelt and thrust his torch into the dark substance that seemed neither gas nor fluid; immediately the flame dimmed and expired. "No creature can breathe therein. No one can approach nor rescue him."

Simon found his voice. "But--why?"

"So that mankind may know peace!" The mage stood erect, eyes glaring. "So that there will be no more slaying, no more war, no more of the madness of violence which this rebel against the Primal Gods has brought upon the earth!"

Simon laughed as the fascination that had held him broke. "Such nonsense! Even if this dead man is who you say he is--which I don't believe for a moment!--what have your efforts gained you? During the two years you say he has lain here the world has had no relief from violence and strife--from wars,

from pillage, from bandit-gangs such as the one which pursues me. Moreover, Rome itself--the greatest center of earthly evils--has seen two of the most monstrous and murderous purges the world has ever known, the first instigated by its prefect Sejanus, the second by the mad emperor Tiberius. During the latter, my own Helen was slain--"

His dark eyes blazed; his fists clenched as he choked on his emotion. K'shasthra nodded slowly, a knowing sadness in his eyes.

"You will aid us," he said. "You understand. You will help us free the world of this age-old curse of hate and evil."

Simon took a deep breath, forcing his mind back to calmness. "You haven't answered me. If the dead man in this pit is truly the cause of all war and strife--?"

"He is not dead, Simon. Nor does he even sleep. He is merely . . . suspended. Even now, I think, he is aware enough to hear every word spoken in this chamber."

Simon shuddered--even threw off his fear with an angry gesture. "Aren't you going to answer my question, K'shasthra? Why is there still violence upon the earth?"

The old wizard shrugged. "The Slayer has spread his evil throughout the lands for many thousands of years. Can we expect that evil to subside so abruptly? It may take many more years--"

"And another thing," pressed Simon, "--Why keep him alive at all, if he's as evil as you say? Is he a god who cannot be slain?"

"No, he is as mortal as any other human, though probably the greatest warrior who has ever lived. The curse of that which he impiously stole from the Primal Gods has withheld from him the peace of a natural death, but only his fighting-prowess and an instinct for survival have kept him alive during these many long centuries."

"Then I ask again: Why keep him alive?"

K'shasthra stood taller, eyes burning fanatically. "So that when humanity finally ends its madness

and subsides into world-wide peace, we of the Order may show them the originator of their former wickedness--and enjoin upon them the paths they must follow in the future lest that scourge be loosed upon them anew. And should they choose not those paths, there is a way to waken the Slayer!"

Simon almost cringed at the madness in the priest's rheumy old eyes and rasping voice. "In other words," he said, keeping his own voice steady with an effort, "you and your fellow sorcerers hope to subjugate mankind to your will."

K'shasthra scowled darkly. "I sense that you have a false and perverted attitude, Simon of Gitta. I had hoped that you would understand. We of the Order wish only to benefit humanity. . . ."

At that moment Simon heard a scrabbling of claws on stone, a fluttering of feathers--and in the next instant was astonished to see a large vulture, evidently the wizard's familiar, come waddling in through the narrow doorway from the stairs. It craned its neck toward K'shasthra, croaking several times while flapping its wings.

"Ormu, my familiar, calls me," muttered the old man. "I forgot that I'd left an important magical brew fermenting. Stay here, Simon; I shall return very soon."

So saying, the mage hurried out of the chamber, the vulture following him in grotesque, waddling haste.

¶

Simon stood unmoving for several moments, listening to K'shasthra's soft footfalls fading away up the stairs. Suspicion stirred within him; though the old wizard's reason for leaving had been given with quick and plausible smoothness, he could recall nothing in the chamber above that suggested preparations for a "magical brew."

Thus, after the sounds of the mage's ascent had faded entirely, he entered the door and began to creep silently up the dark stairs.

As he neared the top he began to hear a voice speaking in hushed

tones--the wizard's--and as he stole along the short passage toward the blanket-draped door Simon began to hear the words clearly:

"... yes, yes, he is here, and you may have him, for he has proved useless to the Order. But you should not have come here. Haven't you been told the rules of the Order often enough to--?"

"Shut up, old rock-lizard!" snarled a coarse voice. "We've followed your rules till now, but there's a limit. The bastard's killed seven of my men, and by Ahriman!--we're going to make sure he takes at least that many days in dying."

Simon's scalp prickled as he recognized the voice of Gutakh, chief of the Mailed Raiders. He did not need to approach the curtain and peer through it to picture the bandit's scarred, sadistic face framed by its bristling dark beard, the narrow eyes that scowled or gloated mercilessly beneath thick eyebrows and steel helm. The soft clinkings of armor and blades told him that several other men must be standing in the small chamber as well.

"Hush, you oaf!" hissed K'sh-asthra. "I've left Simon of Gitta in the chamber below--"

"And just what else is in that chamber?" growled Gutakh, though in a lowered voice. "Gold, perhaps? Gems?"

"No. And in any case, Gutakh, the Order has well paid you and your fellow-outlaws to terrorize this region, to help insure that men will shun it. You have no cause to demand more."

"Oh, don't we?" There was a sneer in the bandit's voice. "I'd say we have good cause indeed. The loss of seven good men demands a great deal of compensation. You must have a lot of loot hidden around here, old wizard. . . ."

Simon backed slowly away and crept down the stairs. Behind him he could hear the voices rising in more animated argument, but he had heard enough. He must immediately find a way out of this place.

Back in the great domed cham-

ber, however, he realized that escape was impossible. The entire wall was one smooth circuit of seamless rock. A glance into the pit quenched the slight hope that he might have overlooked an exit down there. Besides, who could live in the smothering vapor surrounding the mighty-limbed, hard-visaged man who lay entombed therein. . . ?

Suddenly a wild yell rang distantly from the stairway-door--the voice of the wizard, high-pitched in anger or terror. It was followed by the sounds of strange cracklings and hissings, then the screams of several men. The racket lasted only a few seconds; then silence returned.

"Baal!" muttered Simon, sweat dampening his brow. He realized that the argument in the chamber above must have escalated into violence. Doubtless the wizard had defended himself with some sort of magic before being slain. Soon Gutakh and his bandits would be coming down the stair. Simon cursed again, hate blazing in his shadowed eyes as he scanned the torches on the wall. They would make poor weapons. Gods, for a sword!--a blade with which to take at least some of his enemies with him--

Suddenly the memory hit him: the handle of a sword, protruding from the scabbard of the man who lay supine in the pit!

He used a precious minute to take several deep breaths and hold them, letting them out slowly, calming his mind in the way that his great mentor Daramos had taught him. Then he deliberately stepped off the rim of the pit and on to the stone platform perhaps a foot down. The thick vapor swirled about his ankles, imparting a slight chill to his flesh; yet it was not as dense as water, nor even wet--something midway between liquid and airy substance. . . .

Drawing one last lungful of air, Simon purposefully moved down the narrow stairway, felt the vapor close over his head. Despite the dark quality of the medium through which he moved he could see quite

clearly--in fact, the flesh of his arms seemed more pale than usual by contrast. The sound of his feet on the stone seemed greatly muffled, and he wondered if he would be able to hear the approach of Gutakh and his bandits while he was in the pit. . . .

Then he was at the bottom, approaching the man who lay on the dais of carven rock. Surely the man was dead--there was not the slightest sign of breathing or other movement. Perhaps the vapor contained some mummifying property, for there was also not the slightest sign of decay. As Simon drew close the induced calm of his mind was slightly disturbed by an involuntary awe, a tingling fear. Those hawk-like, somewhat Assyrian features, framed by curling black hair and full beard, seemed to connote dignity and intelligence along with ruthlessness and an iron will; there was in addition a slightly goatish, almost unhuman cast to them. The body, now seen up close, was much taller than even the tallest Persian warrior's, and massive in proportion. Uneasily Simon recalled those tales of semi-human giants who once roamed the earth, and found himself wondering what would happen should those mighty limbs begin to stir and flex. . . .

Snuffing the thought, he gripped the sword's handle and tugged. It slid easily from its sheath despite the weight of the body that lay partially upon it. Simon noted briefly that it was of an ancient design, having only a small guard and a wide, tapering blade--yet that blade was as bright as the best Persian steel and the entire sword was large enough to be wielded two-handed.

Without pondering these anomalies, he strode back to the stairway and ascended as rapidly as he could without setting his heart to pounding. As it was, his lungs felt near to bursting as he neared the top of the pit. He dashed up the last few steps and exhaled explosively as his head broke the surface, then

frantically gulped in clean air as the heavy vapor swirled about the back of his neck.

Immediately he heard stomping footfalls, cursing voices and the echoing clink of metal. Men were rushing from the upper stairway into the great domed chamber! Simon crouched back, forcing himself to breathe more shallowly, his face barely above the surface of the vapor; he did not dare to peer up over the rim.

#

"Find the dog!" bellowed the voice of Gutakh. "He can't be far."

"There's no place to hide in here," yelled a man closer to Simon. "Wait--I see stairs going down into the pool. There's a platform just under the rim--"

A bearded face appeared over the edge--a hard, brutal Persian face topped by a steel helmet. Even as the man's eyes widened Simon swung the blade, neatly lopping the head from its surprised owner's shoulders. As the decapitated corpse toppled after its head into the pit, neck-arteries spurting crimson jets, Simon sprang erect and leaped into the midst of his foes, roaring with rage. Steel clashed furiously, cries of fear and anger echoed, and another bandit went down with a cloven skull beneath the great blade.

Simon dodged frantically as a dozen blades sought his flesh; one ripped his tunic and gashed his side, but then he was beyond his enemies and whirling, back to the wall, to confront them anew. As they paused he grabbed a torch with his left hand, snatching it from its bracket.

"Alive!" screamed Gutakh furiously. "Take him alive!"

The crowd of bandits surged in as one man. Simon thrust savagely, the point of his great sword plowing through the links of the nearest bandit's mail-shirt, lodging between ribs. In the same instant another Persian struck him hard on the forearm with a stave, numbing his hand. Snarling, Simon rammed the torch into the man's face, send-

ing him reeling back, howling, with beard ablaze. But then the rest again surged in relentlessly, beating Simon to the ground with fists, clubs and sword-pommels.

"Good lads!" yelled the bandit chief, advancing. "That's right, hold him down--at least four of you. Remember what old K'shasthra said --the bastard's gladiator-trained! Good--now, spread-eagle him."

Gutakh drew a dirk from his belt and stood over Simon, who struggled futilely against the six bandits who held him pinned upon the stone floor. For a moment two pairs of dark eyes glared hatred toward one another.

"Well, Simon of Gitta," snarled Gutakh, licking his thick lips, "you've now cost me ten of my men. But you won't die as quickly as they did, by Ahrlman! For a beginning, you're going to find out whether you like the taste of your own gonads."

The dagger-point started slowly down. Following its motion with sick fascination, Simon was only vaguely aware of the sight beyond it: the bandit with the singed beard, kneeling at the edge of the pool under the mistaken impression that it contained water. But then the man suddenly cried out:

"Hey, Gutakh, there's someone else--"

The bandit's voice choked off abruptly as a large hand shot up and clamped on his neck. In the next instant it ended with a muffled crunch of bone and a clatter of steel--and in the same moment a towering form stepped up out of the vapor-pool and strode purposefully forward, a Persian sword in its right hand and a dirk in its left.

Gutakh whirled, snarling--then suddenly gasped and paled. "Gods of the Hells!" he shrieked. "It's--"

"So, Gutakh, we meet again!"

The voice of the mighty black-bearded warrior was a reverberating growl of menace, his grin a straining rictus of hate. And his eyes, black and glaring-- For an instant Simon felt a surge of irrational ter-

ror, the terror of nightmare, for never had he seen such terrible hatred as that which strained the features and blazed from the eyes of the Slayer--

The Slayer, risen anew from the pit, lusting for blood. . . .

"I might have benefited you and your gang, Gutakh. You should not have betrayed me into the hands of the Order!"

"Get him!" screamed the bandit-chief. "At him--all of you!"

Four of the men holding Simon leaped up to join Gutakh and the rest; the other two slackened their grips slightly, Indecisive. Simon adroitly slipped free from them, drove his stiffened hand into the throat of one while twisting away from the other. The first went down, strangling and gasping; the second drew his dagger and lunged. Simon rolled away, barely evading the blade, and came smoothly to his feet in a fighting-stance. Behind him he heard the clash of steel on steel, the thud of heavy blows on flesh, the shrieks and curses of raging and dying men.

"Die!" screamed Simon's assailant, rushing in and slashing.

Again he barely avoided the blow, then charged and grappled the man. They went down together, Simon's hand locked around the Persian's dagger-wrist, and for a moment wrestled precariously near the brink of the pit. Simon snarled as he felt the fingers of the bandit's left hand gouging into his face, groping for his eyes. Quickly he achieved an arm-lock and rolled his weight into it; the bandit shrieked as his right elbow crunched and cracked backwards. Immediately Simon broke free and shoved his foe with both feet, sending him howling over the edge of the vapor-pool.

Snatching up the fallen dagger, Simon leaped to his feet. The knot of embattled men surged between him and the doorway; even as he watched, another Persian went down screaming, mailed sword-arm flopping loosely, half-severed. Four other bandits lay dead already,

gashed hideously and staining crimson the stone floor. But the remaining few were pressing the Slayer hard, driving him back against the wall.

"Kill him! Kill him!" screeched Gutakh.

Simon rushed forward and thrust at the nearest bandit, but his foot slipped on the blood-slick stone, throwing him off balance; his dagger-point was turned by a mail shirt. Immediately the bandit whirled and swung his sword, but Simon was already beneath the blow, driving forward and crashing together with his foe into the melee, thrusting his dirk up beneath the mail-shirt into the Persian's groin and belly. He heard the Slayer roaring a war-cry in an unknown tongue, felt blood spatter on him as more foes sprawled mortally gashed--

There was a final ring of steel, a final shriek of fear and pain--then silence. Sitting up in a welter of bloody carcasses, Simon saw that only two men remained standing--Gutakh and the Slayer. Gutakh was clutching his right wrist, his brutish face twisted in agony; nearby lay the hand that had been attached to that wrist, its fingers still gripping the sword-pommel.

"You should not have betrayed me to the wizards, Gutakh," rumbled the gigantic warrior. His own sword clattered on the stone, and then his hand shot out and locked on the bandit's throat. Tighter and tighter clenched the fingers of that mighty hand, the forearm-muscles bulging to the thickness of a normal man's calf. The Persian's face purpled as veins popped under the skin, and his eyes bulged horribly. Then came a hideous, grinding crunch of vertebrae and cartilage.

Flinging away the bandit's carcass contemptuously, the Slayer turned and confronted Simon, who wondered uneasily what was to come next. Never had he seen a fighter such as this man! Eight or nine bandits had attacked him simultaneously and he had killed all but one.

True, his mighty chest now heaved from his great exertion, and some of that blood upon him was his own, oozing from a few slight cuts on his arms and face. That proved him mortal, at least. Yet Simon knew that if the Slayer chose to attack him, he stood no chance.

The towering warrior advanced and Simon crouched into a fighting-stance, dirk ready. He felt himself cringe inwardly at the dark glare of hate that still smoldered in the Slayer's eyes. The mighty figure stopped only six feet away, and for a moment the two blood-spattered fighters glared silently at one another.

Suddenly the Slayer's black beard parted in a grin. Bending slightly, he held out his empty sword-hand and said: "By Nergal and all his fiends, man, put away that sticker! Aren't you going to shake the hand of the man who saved your hide?"

¶
An hour later they sat in the upper chamber partaking of the old wizard's food and wine, having cleansed themselves with his store of water before binding up their slight wounds. In a dark corner lay the wizard himself, a sword protruding from his lean breast, while near him sprawled two of the bandits, their corpses oddly charred here and there.

"The old coot put up a fight," growled the Slayer between mouthfuls. "Evidently he knew a few sorcerers' tricks."

"K'shasthra told me that you were responsible for all the warfare and violence on earth," Simon commented.

The Slayer gestured contemptuously and rumbled a low growl. "Arrgh! Such blather! When it comes to strife and violence, humans need no help from me."

"He also said that only one thing would revive you, but didn't specify what it was. How did it happen?"

"You did it, fellow." The herculean warrior held up his sword, the blade of which was now polished to its original brightness. "When

you used this beauty to lop off that bastard's head, it snapped me out of the spell just like that! Then I grabbed his sword and dagger, and ran up just in time to save your hide."

"I see. Blood." Simon nodded somberly. "But, how did you survive the vapor of the pit?"

"The same way you did, of course. I held my breath."

Simon took another swig of the wine. In spite of the giant warrior's matter-of-fact manner touched occasionally even with a bit of grim humor, he did not feel easy in his presence. The smouldering hatred was always evident in those arrogant dark eyes, behind those dark regal features with their hint of the unhuman--hatred ever ready to burst forth again.

"Your sword," said Simon, "--its design is ancient, yet it's obviously of superior steel."

The man nodded. "I forged it myself. After the Cataclysm many arts were gradually forgotten. There came a long period during which mankind lost the knowledge of working iron and steel. But I remembered, and eventually became adept at it." He fondled the weapon almost lovingly, gazing into the mirror of its blade as if at dark memories. "I've had this beauty a long time."

Simon's uneasiness deepened. He rose, took a final swallow of wine, then donned a Persian sword-belt and cloak and picked up a bundle of provisions he had prepared. "We'd best be going. The wizard's vulture evidently escaped and will no doubt be bearing news of this night's events to other members of the High Guardians."

The Slayer nodded again, rising also. "I see that you, too, know something about wizards."

They left the chamber, carrying their provisions, and soon emerged from the rock-crevice into the cold night air. The wind had ceased, the stars were out and a nearly full

moon was rising above the far-off snowy mountains to the east. Some riderless horses stood about on the ridgetop, grazing on the sparse dry grasses.

It took each of the pair but a few minutes to capture a mount for himself.

"I journey westward," said Simon, "--to the plains of Sumer and beyond, eventually to Rome. Will you come with me?"

"No." The Slayer gazed toward the distant mountains. "I go east. I want to pay a call on a few others of the Order of the High Guardians."

"I see. You, too, seek revenge."

They faced one another, an understanding hanging between them.

"I think that you wander under a bit of the same curse that drives me," said the giant warrior, "and I see some of the same hatred in your eyes. . . . Well, good luck, Simon of Gitta. May all your enemies know terror and death! And someday, mayhap, one of us may somehow meet the gods who have cursed us, and slay them also."

Again their sword-hands clasped in a firm, strong grip.

"Good luck to you also, Slayer. But before we part, will you not tell me your name?"

The looming warrior, dark in silhouette against the moonlight, stood silent for a moment. Then he laughed harshly.

"I think you already know well, Simon, the name your Samaritan legends have given me. But since you want to hear it aloud, it is--"

The syllables rang out, hard as the clang of iron on stone in the cold night air. Again Simon nodded somberly. It was indeed as he had already known.

Then Nimrod--mighty hunter and warrior, slayer of nations, defier of Heaven--turned away and, mounting his steed, rode rapidly eastward up the slope of the moonlit ridge, into the night.

The Dark Circle

By Carl Jacobi

Elliot walked slowly down the beach, looking over the damage wrought by the typhoon. The Arafurn sea stretched smooth and glass-like now in the westering sun, and only drying patches of spume and fallen palms farther back on the island's shore showed there had been a blow at all.

Overhead gulls circled, filling the air with their cries. The sand was still wet and hard.

But Elliot did not see the man until he had reached the north side of the lagoon. Then he stopped dead in his tracks and stared.

The man lay supine, one arm outstretched, one doubled under his back. He wore a pair of duck trousers, and his shirt was ripped open, exposing a barrel chest. Even as Elliot stood there, the man opened his eyes and sat up slowly. Blinking, he spat sea-brine from his mouth.

"What place is this, Matey?"

Elliot's gaze passed on to the Five Needles, those corral jags that menaced the entrance of the lagoon. High up on the fifth, like paper blown against a drift fence, was the wreckage of a lifeboat. At the water's edge lay a cork preserver, the black letters reading: S. S. Morinda.

The man nodded. "The Morinda," he said, "she was a rotten little tub. When the wind hit her she went down like a stone. We got one boat launched, me and the mate and one of the quartermasters. I don't know what happened to them. Feedin' the sharks most likely."

Elliot bent down, passed one arm around the man's shoulders and helped him to his feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

The man nodded and spat again. "Cope's the name," he said. "Sheldon Cope. What place did you say this was?"

"Endloss Island." Elliot studied him shrewdly, noting that his clothes were not those of a seaman. "Two hundred and twenty miles west of Timor Laut. Grab my arm, and I'll help you across to the storage shack on the other side of the lagoon. I can fix you some food there."

Half an hour later, sprawled back in a canvas chair, the rescued man munched crackers and tinned beef, then fastened his lips around a whisky bottle and drank until he was gasping. He was heavy-set man with iron-grey hair, a raw blemish on one cheek that spoke perhaps of an old knife wound, and eyes pinched and glittery under shaggy brows.

Swiftly all traces of his experience left him. Warmed by the whisky, he propped his feet on a nail keg and buried himself deeper in the slack chair.

"Are you sure the others all drowned?" Elliot asked. "I've an outrigger up the shore a piece. Maybe we should . . ."

"Sure they drowned, Matey." Cope helped himself to the bottle again, drained another peg. "But go ahead and look if it'll make you feel any better."

Elliot hesitated. Frowning, he crossed to a shelf, took down a brass telescope and stepped out the door. Outside, he placed the glass to his eye and studied the horizon carefully, looking from north to south. But he saw nothing. There was only the reddish sea and the sun dropping into it like a ball of fire. He shrugged and made his way back to the shack.

When he re-entered he saw that Cope had his eyes turned on the diving suit and coils of air hose in the far corner. The man looked up, smiled thickly.

"Pearls, I gather."

For an instant Elliot stood still,

answering his gaze coldly. By all rights the very presence of another white man should have raised his spirits tremendously. Yet there was something about Cope he disliked. Two months now, ever since his father had gone to Darwin, Elliot had been the only one of his race here on Endloss. The natives who worked his copra plantation farther inland spoke little English, and the only diversion he had was the unwanted diversion of the storms which raked the island regularly once a fortnight. He took a chair opposite and began to fill his pipe.

"Yes, there's pearls here," he said. "But the lagoon is too deep for safety. Why?"

Cope took another swallow of the liquor. There were bright spots on either cheek now; his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and it was clear that if he drank any more he would become intoxicated.

"Pearlin' is my stock and trade, that's why, Matey. Been dealin' in pearl for twenty years now. Handled some of the biggest ever found in the Queensland zone."

He locked his fingers together, hiccuped and sat there, breathing hard.

"Ever hear of the Dark Circle?"

Elliot shook his head. "I don't believe so."

"I found that. Perfect crystal. No fossil seams and almost sixty pearl grains. It was down in twenty fathoms, too deep for the kanakas. But I got it out. Or rather I figured a way how. Takes brains to do that."

Elliot sucked his pipe in silence. A slight glitter had entered his eyes, but he sat quite still, staring at the blank wall before him.

"Funny about the Dark Circle," Cope went on. "It lay in a lagoon that looked a lot like this over at Satterlee Island. That's what reminded me of it. Satterlee's a little to the south'ard of Erromanga in the New Hebrides, and it's hardly more'n a reef, speakin' accurate."

The rescued man seized the whisky bottle again as if fearful it

would be taken away from him. He fondled it like an old lady does a cat, then tilted it once more to his lips.

"Maybe you ain't interested. Maybe . . . ?"

"Go on," Elliot said.

"Well it happened twenty years ago. Twenty years almost to the month. A kanaka saw it first. He went down with a rock the way they do, and he landed on a ledge twelve fathoms down. There was plenty of shell there, but there was one that caught his eye. Not so large, you understand, but with a queer shape and all covered with marine growth, the way the pearl shells are. And it was half open."

"Inside was a pearl, the biggest black pearl that kanaka had ever seen. The kanaka got plenty excited. He ripped off his basket, cut the shell loose and started for the surface. But half way he musta thought he saw a shark or somethin', 'cause the thing slipped outa his fingers. That's the trouble with natives; you never c'n depend on 'em. Anyway the shell went down, and it missed the shelf, fallin' in deep water."

Cope looked across at his listener, paused before the story that hung in the offing.

"It fell in twenty fathoms, or thereabouts, and the kanaka made a try for it, but of course it was no use. The pressure at even half that depth is awful. He shot to the surface bleedin' from his eyes and ears, and it nearly did for 'im. But he'd seen the pearl, and he talked. When he described it as the biggest that'd ever come outa the Corral sea, I got interested."

"Satterlee had quite a settlement at the head of the lagoon then. There was a post-office, and a lot of traders with their native women, and there was a guy called Janeson or Jamison, or somethin' like that. I never was good at rememberin' names. This Jamison was a big, handsome devil, English, I b'lieve, and he had a reputation."

"He had the reputation of bein' the best pearl diver in the district."

He had three divin' suits, which was a fortune twenty years ago. They warn't the cheap soaphandlers the Malays use either. All three of 'em had reinforced breast-plates and the latest make of copper helmets. It was said he could go deeper and stay down longer than any man in the business.

"But, Matey, were the women wild about 'im? Were they? There was about twelve white women on the island and plenty of native girls, and some of those native girls were nice bits of goods. They was all crazy about Jamison. He had a big, strappin' body, and sorta smilin' eyes, and I guess he was a handsome one at that.

"But he was a fool. He wouldn't have nothin' to do with any of 'em except his wife. She was English too, named Josie, if I remember correct. A blond haired beauty with a shape like a Venus, if you know what I mean.

"Well sir, soon's I heard about that pearl I started figgerin' how I could get the thing. And that wasn't as easy as it sounds. The kanaka's story had gone the rounds, of course, and five or six of the islanders had had a try at it, without any result. As for me, in the first place I'd been usin' kanakas to bring up my stuff, and I had only one divin' suit on my ship, the Flyin' Gull, a cheap piece of shoddy that wouldn't stand fifteen fathoms. In the second place we were at Satterlee only for water. The island you see, was practically leased grounds. Those that lived there figgered anything found in the lagoon was theirs, and they was ready to fight to hold their interests.

"I saw right off poachin' was outa the question. So I went ashore and looked up this guy, Jamison.

"'Jamison,' I says, tryin' hard to keep my eyes off that wife o' his, 'why don't you and me get that pearl?'

"That took 'im by surprise, as I'd known it 'twould, and he says, 'Just what do you mean, Mister Cope?'

"'Well sir,' I says, 'it's simple. You live here, and you've got a right to dive for the thing. Besides which you're the only man with the equipment and experience to go down in that deep water. You go down and bring the thing up, and we'll say nothin' to nobody, and I'll market the thing for you in Sidney. We'll split two ways, and I take a third. Fair enough?'

"Well, he looks at me with those baby-blue eyes o' his, and he smiles easy like, and right off he asks the question I'm expectin'.

"'But I don't quite understand,' he says, 'where you come in. If I dive for the pearl, 'twould be mine, and I could easily market the thing myself.'

"'No,' I replies, 'you couldn't. Not for two reasons. First off, one pearl that size is a white elephant, so t' speak. It wouldn't fit into a necklace, and every buyer would be leery of it. Second, there's me. I aim to camp right off there in the lagoon from now 'til kingdom come, if necessary. The minute you or anyone else brings it up, I'll pass the word on to the island. And I think you know what those traders are. With a pearl that's worth a fortune like that, they'd join forces and slit the man's throat that had it quicker'n you could bat an eye.'"

Cope paused and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He took another drink and wiped his mouth jerkily.

"Shows you what plans'll do," he continued. "Jamison saw right off I had 'im there, and he sobers up quick. 'I never thought o' that,' he says. And then quicker'n a flash he ups from his chair and throttles me.

"'You mangy, benighted pirate,' he says. 'I've got a good mind to kill you.'

"Well, we went down on the floor, rollin' over and over, hammerin' each other as hard as we could. Jamison's good lookin' wife tried to break us apart. But I was strong and hard then, and finally I got 'im in a corner with my knife prickin' his throat.

"Now then," I says, 'how about it?'

"He glares at me and nods, and I let 'im up. When I left that night, it was all arranged. Jamison, it seems, had figgered on gettin' that pearl and givin' it to his wife as an anniversary present. But he knew when he was licked, and he figgered he could use two thirds of the money rather than none at all. When he found it, I was to take it to Sidney, givin' 'im for security all the small pearls I already had plus a written note.

"We didn't start divin' for a week. Jamison said there'd be a native celebration then, and if we waited we could have the lagoon to ourselves. And meantime I got sorta interested in his wife.

"She was blonde and pretty as a picture, like I said, a real beauty that almost slapped you off your feet when you looked at her, and she had one young 'un that had the same blue eyes as Jamison. One day when Jamison was over at the village I come across her in the garden back of her bungalow.

"Josie," I says, familiar like, 'why don't you drop that wash-rag husband of yours and ship with me. I've got a trim little square-rigger out in the harbor, and I'll make you queen of the south seas. 'Sides which, I continues, I know a cove snugger'n this where we can lay to when we want, and you can bring the young 'un along or leave 'im here just as you like.'

"Well sir, she flares up like a hornet at that. She picks up a garden rake, hoists it over her shoulder, and says cold as ice, 'Mister Cope, you are a no account rascal. Get off these premises, or I'll get my husband.'

Cope grinned as he slumped deeper into the chair. His face was flushed from alcohol now, and the grin grew into a reminiscent chuckle.

"I went, but all the way back to the Flyin' Gull I got to thinkin'. Funny, when a thing's within your reach and you know you can't have it, you want it more'n ever. I

wanted that pearl, and now I wanted that woman, and by 'the eternal I meant to have 'em both.

"It was easy to see why she'd taken such a shine to Jamison in the first place, of course. It was that fine strappin' body o' his. I thought to myself, now if he was a little weasel like Rigori, my Portuguese mate, she'd drop 'im quicker'n a hot potato. Women are like that, I know.

"Well, the week went by, and by the end of it when we were ready to dive I had everything figgered out. You see I'd talked to some of the traders, and I knew the lay of the lagoon bottom by heart. Near the south shore there was a gradual slope to deep water. Deep for a lagoon, it was. But toward the north shore there was a spot known as Pelling's Deep. No one had actually sounded the depth there, but it was a big drop-off.

"Maybe you're beginnin' to get the idea. Jamison's gear would let him go down twenty fathoms, but not much more. At that depth he had to be pulled up slowly with regular decompression period waits. If he went down deeper and then come up fast he'd get the bends sure as shootin'.

"And a man who's had the bends bad ain't much good after that. He's just a lump o' flesh, helpless as a baby. It's a knotting up of the spine or somethin' caused by too sudden changes o' pressure.

"All I had to do was wait until Jamison sent up that pearl, then let the anchor slip a bit and haul him over that drop-off. When he came up, he'd either be a jelly you'd have to pry out of the suit, or he'd be a cripple for life. Either way, who was to blame me?

"Then, I thought, when Lady Proud Josie, sees her man carried ashore like a sack of meal she'll change her mind. She'll get disgusted, and she'll be glad to take my offer. Women are like that. At least all the women I'd ever come alongside of.

"Well Jamison come aboard bright and early. I got the baskets ready, and I give 'im my orders.

"This is about the place where the kanaka saw that shell and dropped it," I says. "Send up all the big 'uns you can see, and we're sure to find it. Your airhose ain't so very long, so I'll pull you up after a while, and we c'n slide over a bit.

"He agrees, not havin' any ink-lin' o' what I had in mind. Five minutes later he goes down the ladder in a stream o' bubbles.

"The first place we drew a blank, so Jamison came up and rested a while, and then we moved over, and he tried again.

"At that second place right away Rigori lets out a yell. The basket comes up with one shell in it alone. And it's the shell that has the pearl. The Dark Circle, as it come to be called. I never saw nothin' like it afore. I just stood there and stared.

"That kanaka hadn't lied a bit. It was the biggest and most perfect black pearl I'd ever see. Soft and soapy when you touched it, and not a single flaw. Worth ten thousand dollars if it was worth a cent.

"Well, I had half what I wanted, and now all that was left was to fix Jamison. I slid that pearl into my pocket, and then I began pullin' Jamison up. When he was halfway to the surface I let 'im hang for the decompression wait. And meanwhile I began to pay out slack on the anchor.

"Pretty soon we'd drifted close to the drop-off. The water looked black as ink there when you looked down into it as if the bottom lay in the middle of the earth. 'Now!' I says to Rigori, and we let the winch run wild. Down he went, the line sizzlin'. 'All right, Mister Jamison,' I says, 'you're supposed to like deep water. How do you like it that deep?'

"After that I sat and smoked a long time and played me a game of solitaire, and then we pulled him up fast. And it was just like I'd expected. Jamison was out cold when we got 'im on deck. I could see he'd never walk again. He had the bends sure and proper. Smooth,

eh? Jamison out of the way, and I had the pearl, and no one would blame me for either.

"But Jamison's wife, Josie, didn't carry on quite as I'd expected. She didn't scream or faint the way most women do when she saw 'im. She held the door open while they carried 'im into the house, and after that she sat in a chair, dry-eyed, sayin' nothin'.

"Me, I got her aside after a while, and I made my offer again. But she wouldn't answer me. Just sat there starin' into space as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Okay, I thought, I was nice enough to ask. Now I'll take matters in my own hands. So that night Rigori and I came ashore again, headin' for the bungalow. The Flyin' Gull was all ready to put to sea.

"We found Josie sittin' like a wooden image on the veranda with her young 'un, and we got her afore she could let out a yip. Rigori clapped a jute sack over her head. She kicked and scratched like a tiger, but we carried her down to the dory and rowed back to the Flyin' Gull.

"Then and there hell popped. Ever try to cross a blood-mad female, Matey? Don't try it. On deck Josie slips outa Rigori's hands, rips off the jute sack and comes at me with a scream.

"'You!' she cried, 'you fiend!'

"I laughed and flung her off, and what does she do but dart across to Rigori and yank his knife outa his belt. Then with more strength than I give her credit for, she throws the thing at me. It caught me too, right on this cheek, slammed me hard against the rail.

"With that the woman does a leap and a jump clean overboard and starts swimmin'. But not for long. Rigori may be only a half-size Portuguese, but he don't lose his head, and of course we couldn't let her reach shore.

"Rigori got out his pistol and takes slow and careful aim, balancin' the barrel on the rail. The second shot got her. She turned over on

her side like a slab of driftwood that's been rammed, and then she went down easy like until all we could see was her yellow hair."

Silence followed as Cope finished his narrative. The rescued man put the bottle to his lips, found it empty and flung it with an oath to the far corner of the shack. Across in the other chair Elliot sat rigid, eyes narrowed to crescents. He moved now, said quietly,

"And Jamison? What became of him?"

Cope shrugged. "I never rightly heard. He stayed on Satterlee for a while, raisin' the kid, I believe. But he wasn't good for much. Couldn't even walk with crutches. Had to be pushed around in a wheel chair. I took the Dark Circle to Sidney, sold it and sold the Flyin' Gull. Since then I been more or less a man o' leisure."

Nodding, Elliot took his cold pipe from his lips, laid it on the table. A muscle was twitching perceptibly low down on his left cheek.

"I'm going to put you up here," he said. "I could take you up to my bungalow farther inland, but I've had native labor trouble on the plantation the last few weeks, and the sight of a strange face might start trouble. You don't mind . . . ?"

Cope shrugged and began pulling off his shoes jerkily. "This place is good enough for us," he said. "See you in the mornin'."

Ten minutes later Elliot was striding alone through the blackness toward his bungalow. As he walked his fists were clenched and his mouth was a hard, bitter line.

When morning came he returned down the trail to find Cope sitting on the storage shack stoop, whitening a piece of drift wood. The man had his shirt off, and in the early light his shoulders gleamed, rippling with muscle and sinew.

"Last night," Elliot began without preamble, "you told me of deep water diving. I've got something I'd like to show you."

He reached in his pocket and drew forth a small chamois bag. Opening it, he let fall into his palm

a handful of pearls.

"Not so large," he said quietly, "but all perfect or almost so. The lagoon here is practically virgin, but only a few spots can be worked. And the shallow spots unfortunately have mostly green-edged inferior shell."

Cope dropped his pieces of driftwood as he stared at the crystals with greedy eyes.

"How deep?" he demanded suddenly.

"Eighteen fathoms beyond the shallows," Elliot replied. "But there's a ridge extending from one shore to the other. On the sea side of that it's even deeper, too deep for diving."

Cope said nothing for an instant. He took one of the pearls in his hands, turned it over and over.

"Maybe you don't stay down long enough to look over the grounds," he suggested. "Maybe . . ."

His voice died off, and he shot a glance at the blue lagoon sparkling in the sunlight.

"Tell you what," he said suddenly, "you loan me that gear of yours, and I'll go down, see what I can find. Me, I'm used to deep water. If I get anything worth while, we can divide it half."

Elliot returned the pearls to the chamois sack slowly. There was a faraway look in his eyes, and he gazed at Cope a long moment in silence.

"All right," he agreed at length, "but there's one thing I want understood. You're to take no shell from the lip of the ridge. That's my property. I've worked it; it's fairly rich, and I'll stand for no interference."

The two men went into the storage shack, brought out the heavy diving dress, the air hose and line and the hand pump. On the lagoon shore a small dory was drawn up on the sand. Half an hour later, the rubber suit on, Cope waited for Elliot to give his final instructions and lock the helmet in place.

"Remember," Elliot said, "stay away from that ridge. I'm willing

to give you half of anything you find, but the shell on the ridge is mine. Also the coral there is sharp as a razor, and if you make a misstep, it'll cut your airhose."

He dropped the helmet in place, gave it a quarter turn, locking it, and handed Cope an electric torch. Through the glass face plate the rescued man's eyes winked back at him leeringly.

Then Cope was sliding down into the blue water. Down he went, his disproportionate figure disappearing gradually in the depth shadows. Air bubbles from his exhaust valve gurgled to the surface.

For a quarter of an hour Elliot worked the pump rhythmically. Then Cope came up with a full basket of shell, his face drawn, his eyes glittery.

"All green-edged and yellow stuff," he said. "And this damned flash of yours burned out on me. Pull over a bit, and I'll try 'er blind."

He rested only a moment before he went down a second time. In the dory Elliot payed out line until Cope signalled he was on the bottom. After that there was only the clank of the pump and the slapping of the waves against the dory's prow.

The air hose and the line continued to unreel. After moving toward the south beach Cope seemed to have turned abruptly and headed farther out in the lagoon. Headed straight for Elliot's ridge!

Elliot's lips pressed together in a grim line. Seizing the line he gave three sharp jerks, the signal that the diver must go no farther.

There was an answering jerk. But the line and the hose continued to pay out. Savagely Elliot jerked the line three times again. The crazy brainless fool. He'd warned him to stay away from that ridge. And without a light . . .

When it happened it seemed unreal there in the quiet daylight. One moment the rubber hose was sliding slowly, steadily into the still water. The next it was racing into the depths like a striking snake. It stopped and an instant

later hung slack. Elliot yanked at it with both hands.

But the hose fell through his fingers loosely. And twenty yards out on the lagoon a slow languid column of air bubbles gyrated to the surface.

Two days later the Inter-island freighter, Merauke, dropped anchor at Endloss Island, picked up Elliot's copra and deposited a passenger. The passenger was handed down into the ship's boat carefully and rowed ashore. On the beach Elliot stood waiting, his lean face hiding all emotion.

"Dad!" When the boat was still yards from shore, Elliot ran out, waded waist deep and helped guide the craft in. "Dad, it's good to see you."

Seamen lifted a wasted figure into a wheel chair that stood in readiness. The older man sat back exhausted and surveyed his son through wan eyes.

"It's good to be back," he said. "The trip was almost too much for me. But I have news, son, good news. The physicians at Darwin believe that two more treatments will prepare me for an operation. And the operation has an even chance of making me walk again."

Elliot said nothing. Tight-lipped, he shook his father's hand and began to push the wheel chair down the lagoon shore.

Not until they were abreast of the storage shack and the trail leading up to the plantation did the old man speak again. He stared then at the lifeboat wreckage on one of the coral jags and shook his head.

"Storm, eh? I heard there was a bad one hereabouts. Do any damage?"

Elliot shook his head. "No, no damage," he replied. "But I'm afraid we'll need a new diving dress. The old one is lost at the bottom of the lagoon."

The old man looked up, and his brow wrinkled in a puzzled frown.

"Lost?" he repeated. "How's that?"

"I used it," Elliot replied, "to settle an old debt."

Drums of the Bizango

By Marc A. Cerasini and Charles Hoffman

John Gorman ceased his furious pacing back and forth across the sandy beach for only a moment, just long enough to curse loudly for the hundredth time. He cursed the blue Caribbean waters, he cursed the white sands of Haiti under his booted feet, he cursed the tropical sun which slowly sank behind the horizon. But most of all he cursed the little Frenchman with the bulging eyes and the sob story that convinced the young American that he should use his newly-acquired ketch to run rum through the Prohibition blockades into Florida, and then left him to wait for hours at the rendezvous. Gorman slammed his scarred right fist into his left palm and turned his eyes away from the clear blue waters toward the fishing village once more.

Away from the dock, in the tiny hamlet on the lush, green hill that rose from the rippling sands, the locals ignored the white man. They went about their daily tasks; the women carrying huge baskets of fruits, bundles of firewood, or jugs of water drawn from the clear stream that ran down from the foothills; the men stoking cookfires and passing around bottles of clairin, the cheap, clear rum of the islands. Their ebony hides gleamed in the fast retreating sunlight. A woman's voice could be heard, singing a rhythmic song that wafted down to Gorman on the still, tropical air.

The American turned away from the simple domestic scene to scan once more the dirt road that twisted through the village, climbed the rounded hill, and finally disappeared into the forest of the Artibonite Valley, the road that Claude Vidoq should have traveled hours ago burdened with the load of rum that Gorman had paid for with the last of his money.

"Damn," muttered Gorman under his breath, his anger flaring once more. The American was furious, angry that he had been called away from Haiti before he could procure the rum, but not before he had paid the Frenchman for it. He was angry at Vidoq, whose smooth talk had convinced Gorman that he should smuggle the liquor to America. But most of all, he was angry with himself for listening to the wizened little man with his sad story and his dreams of a better life for his offspring.

Gorman had had his doubts when he entered into this venture. Whatever else he was, John Gorman was not a smuggler. Vidoq was a shady character, a criminal with a price on his head in a dozen countries, forced to flee with his adolescent daughter to Haiti—one of the few places left in the world where he was not a wanted man. White men were not popular in Haiti, especially Frenchmen, yet Vidoq could not leave—there was nowhere left for him to go.

However, Vidoq had a dream that his young daughter, the child of a Belgian missionary that he had somehow convinced to marry him, should be educated in France or America. After the death of his wife, the shifty Frenchman came to the realization that he was not a fit father for the young girl, and so was compelled to find the money to send his daughter away to a good school in a civilized land, to give her a chance in life. Opportunity knocked when Vidoq heard of a smuggler's boat filled with bootleg rum from nearby Jamaica that had run aground on the coast of Haiti. Its cargo had been claimed by a Voodoo bokor somewhere in the Artibonite Valley, well ahead of the United States government troops sent to seize it.

Vidoq, who learned about the rum shipment from one of his many underworld sources, proposed to act as middleman between Gorman and the local bokor--known as King Samedhi. The Frenchman would negotiate for the rum, Gorman would pay for it, smuggle it into the States, and they would both split the handsome profits. Gorman, of course, would be taking most of the risks, and this thought had entered the American's mind. But he was touched by the Frenchman's wish to send his girl, only sixteen and already a beauty, away from this benighted land and back to civilization.

The locals were not too tight-lipped with Gorman, for the American's free and easy manner gained him acceptance with the blacks, and they had told him tales in hushed tones about the bokor of the hills, the head of his own bizango--secret society. The tales had chilled his blood and sent shivers down his spine. The American had no desire to deal with King Samedhi, and since Vidoq was willing--well, thought Gorman at the time, so be it. Now he regretted the rash action that caused him to trust the ugly Frenchman with his money.

"Hell," fumed Gorman, "I've waited long enough." It was time to get to the bottom of this, procure his rum, and get out of Haiti before he was in too deep. The first step was to find Vidoq, and Gorman knew just where to look. The American jumped nimbly up on the raised dock and ran across the rickety planks to where his boat was moored.

Gorman leaped aboard the ketch and double-checked the lines, making sure the vessel was secure. The ketch, which he had purchased from a blackbird in Australia, had once been christened "The Snark," or so the faded paint on her stern attested. The slaver that sold the ship to Gorman claimed she had been built by another American, a world famous writer who had died only a few years ago. Indeed, the fine lines of the ketch, the unusual materials of which she was constructed, and the quality of the few of her

original fittings that remained, all conveyed the fact that the ship was no ordinary South Sea blackbird. For Gorman, however, the main attraction was the price he paid for her. He'd needed to leave Australia, the "Snark" was for sale at a reasonable price, so John Gorman came to be her master.

Gorman entered the main cabin, where he immediately pulled his six-shooter from its compartment. The gun had served him well in Australia, and though he did not intend to do murder, he was too cautious a man not to bring it along. Foolish was the white man who traveled the rural villages of Haiti without protection. Gorman left the cabin, locking it securely. A final look confirmed that his ship was secure. The black sail, used at night in the smuggling trade, was ready to be unfurled at a moment's notice. There was plenty of fuel for the not-so-reliable engine, and the ship was fully provisioned. Gorman grunted in satisfaction and jumped back up onto the dock. Tucking the gun under his belt, where it would be hidden by his seaman's coat, he crossed the beach to the village.

* * * *

Minutes later, the tall, powerfully-built American walked between the shanties that lined the narrow dirt street of the rural village, making for the inland side of the town. The locals drew to either side of the narrow street, letting Gorman pass--no doubt daunted by the purposeful stride and the scowl of rage that darkened the white man's features. Gorman did not notice. At length he came to the door of the shanty that served as home to Claude Vidoq and his young daughter, Mimi. Gorman raised his scarred fist to knock at the door, but stopped abruptly. The flimsy door to the shanty was broken, hanging loosely from a worn hemp cord that served as a hinge. Inside, all was dark and silent.

Nonplussed by this turn of events, Gorman stepped cautiously across the threshold. Inside, the place was a shambles, as if it had

been looted. Of the Vidoqs there was no sign. The American went back into the street, and searched for some local who could give him a clue to the whereabouts of the Frenchman. He noticed an old black woman watching him from a hut across the alley, but when the crone noticed the white youth approaching, she slammed and bolted her door.

Cursing, Gorman turned again toward Vidoq's hut as another local, a black man in ragged clothes, slunk past. His patience at an end, Gorman grabbed the black man by his frayed collar and slammed him against the wall of the Frenchman's hut. A squawk of fear and indignation rose from the black's thick lips. Gorman, pinning the man against the flimsy wall, spoke roughly to the Haitian in Creole.

"Where is the blanc who lived here . . . ?"

The black, his eyes rolling in their sockets, sought desperately for anyone who would help extricate him from the fierce white man's grip. A group of loungers, who had been idling at the end of the street, noticed the commotion. But they turned away as if they had not seen a thing, and moved in the opposite direction. Sweat beaded on the black's brow as he turned to face his captor. Gorman spoke again.

"I said, where is the man who lived here . . . ?"

"Ga . . . Gone . . . he gone . . .," the black squeaked fearfully.

"Gone where?" said Gorman, slamming the man once more against the shanty's wall, shaking the whole flimsy structure. The black turned fearfully, looking over his shoulder as he struggled in the white man's grip. He acted as if the very touch of the Frenchman's house were deadly. "He gone . . . to the graveyard," the black finally managed to croak.

"What!?!?"

"He die! Tree days 'go, he die . . . buried on da hill . . ."

"Damn," Gorman muttered, loosening the Haitian, who stumbled away, gaining speed as he moved down the street, his wide eyes never

leaving the form of the American who now stood in shocked surprise before the empty hut.

Gorman remained there for a few more moments, gathering his thoughts before turning inland once more. He knew the location of the local burial ground, and he was determined to confirm the truth of what he had been told. Gorman, in his rage, was not thinking clearly, for never would a native of this land approach a graveyard at night, and all had warned Gorman repeatedly of the foolhardiness of going there after dark, when the seance--the nocturnal Voodoo parties--roamed. But the American's thoughts focused on learning the truth about Vidoq, and perhaps of finding the missing rum.

Minutes later, as John Gorman drew away from the fires of the village, the voices of the locals passed from his hearing to be replaced with the night sounds of the darkening forest. The white man climbed the hill toward the small burial ground as a huge tropical moon rose. In the full moon's glow, Gorman was able to see, at length, the rural graveyard with its simple wooden markers spread out before him. He boldly entered through the crude gate.

Suddenly, the hackles rose on the American's neck and he froze for an instant, then quietly ducked into the cover of a copse of trees. Gorman had heard voices, native voices . . . raised in a savage chant. Reaching down, he instinctively drew his gun, and his fist tightened around the worn handle. A slight breeze sprang up, stirring the foliage around Gorman, masking for a moment the faint sounds he had heard. As the wind subsided, the beat of a cata--a small Voodoo drum, the sound of which Gorman had seen send grown men into their huts to cower by their hearths, was clearly audible.

Then, another sound intruded . . . the unmistakable sound of digging. Quietly, Gorman crossed the graveyard, following the sound of

shovel and spade and the rhythmic throbbing of the cata. He moved through the moon-swept cemetery like a phantom, crouching low, darting behind trees, between the simple wooden markers, always heading toward the sound of the drum. Finally, peering from behind a bush, Gorman could see clearly outlined in the moonlight the shapes of three men. One was squatting, beating a drum positioned between his bandy legs, the other two were furiously digging in time with the savage rhythm.

Gorman had been crouching there for only a moment when the hollow sound of a spade hitting wood was heard. The drumbeat stopped abruptly, and the white man could hear the guttural voices of the blacks as they spoke softly to each other. One barked a savage laugh. Then, another voice spoke loudly and clearly, and the American could discern what was being said.

"Rise, rise, malefacteur . . . come forth from your grave, evil one . . ." the black's voice demanded.

Gorman heard the loud crash of splintering wood as the lid of the newly-uncovered coffin was torn off.

"Drag the evil one from the earth . . . so that we may present him to King Samedhi, reborn as a servant to him whom he wronged in life . . ."

Gorman could hear the sounds of the coffin being hauled from the grave, the wheezing of one of the men as he struggled with the dead weight. Someone began to beat a drum once more, but this time the sound came from far off in the nighted forest.

Gorman saw a bandy-legged black, who was outlined clearly in the wan moonlight, turn toward the sound of the far-off drumbeat. He could see the white gleam of the man's teeth as he smiled evilly, then spoke in a booming voice once more . . .

"Rise, blanc, King Samedhi summons you from across de wood, and you must hear de call . . ., rise, Claude Vidoq!"

With the sound of that familiar name, rage swept reason from the bosom of John Gorman. He rose to his full height, and crossed the open sward in plain view, running toward the blacks before he realized what he was doing. One of the Haitians was still in the grave, having just passed the heavy coffin to his fellow. Another black was bending low over the oblong box, and did not notice the approach of the armed white man. But the houngan, the one who had done the chanting, saw the white man instantly, and hissed a warning to the others.

Before Gorman could reach the violated grave, two of the three blacks turned tail and disappeared into the forest, leaving the drum and digging tools behind. The third man floundered as he climbed out of the hole. He was not quick enough, and as he struggled to his feet, the American was upon him. Gorman brought his powerful right arm to bear, striking the black with the butt of his gun. The Negro dropped as if poleaxed.

In the darkness, John Gorman could hear the others fleeing through the forest at top speed. He knew he could never catch them now . . . they were lost to the night.

The American turned to examine the Haitian he had brought down, then the open coffin. Clearly etched in the bright light of the full moon, Gorman could see the wasted body of Claude Vidoq. Despite the machinations of the houngan, it was plain that the Frenchman would never rise again. Gorman tucked his gun back into his belt and, lifting the broken lid of the coffin, covered his friend's corpse once more.

Just as the white man was about to rouse his prisoner, he heard another sound off to his right. He drew the gun again and peered into the darkness, where he could discern the outline of a form approaching.

"Hold it . . ." Gorman called to the shape, "come no nearer . . . or I'll shoot."

A woman's voice startled Gor-

man, speaking American English with a slight Southern accent.

"Doan shoot, dammit . . . I ain't gonna hurt ya, ya dumb son of a bitch . . ."

Gorman lowered his gun slightly as the shape drew nearer, to finally step into a bright patch of moonlight. Before him stood a young black woman, clad in tight riding breeches that accented her firm buttocks and a loose, cotton blouse with a deep cleavage that revealed firm, upright breasts. The handsome Negress strode boldly up to Gorman, braced her strong legs and looked up square into the surprised face of the adventurer. Before Gorman could speak, the woman cursed again.

"You stupid bastard . . ." she railed. "It took me six months to get close enough to observe the ritual of raising a dead man . . . six months, an' youall had to blunder in . . . Damn, damn, DAMN! Who the hell are you, anyway?"

For a second, Gorman was speechless, then replied, "I'm a friend of this man here," he motioned with his gun to the broken coffin. "I came to see his grave for myself . . ."

"Seen enough?" the black woman shot back insolently. Then, before the man could answer, "Looks like ya'all killed one a' King Samedhi's men . . ."

"Aw, he ain't dead . . ." Gorman replied quickly, then, "King Samedhi? I guess I heard right then . . . this is one of his men?"

"Sure . . . your 'friend' gyped the King outta fair payment for a batch o' rum, so Samedhi had a coup n'ame, a bane, put on the Frenchman, killed him, with a coup poudre--a magical powder, an' now Samedhi's claimed the man's flesh as payment for the debt . . ."

"That bastard Vidoq was playing both sides against the middle--he cheated Samedhi outta the cash I gave him, and I bet he was going to cheat me outta the rum!" Gorman shook his head in admiration of the Frenchman's nerve. Then said suspiciously, "That still doesn't tell me

what you are doing here . . ."

"That's simple. I'm an anthropologist. Jessie Brown, of Tuskegee University . . . I've been studying the religions of my people--tracing the roots of their beliefs from the African homeland . . . I've been living in Haiti for over two years now--"

"What's to learn--savage customs of a barbaric people . . ."

"To you maybe," the woman's eyes flared angrily now, "but to me, it is the heritage of my people . . . a way of justice, peace, and a sense of community . . . why, this place was once an island of slaves . . . my people kept their identity and their heritage alive through the rituals and customs they brought with them from Africa . . ."

"Bah!" Gorman spat back, "you call robbing graves part of your heritage?"

"You doan understand," she answered. "Your friend cheated King Samedhi, cheated the King's people . . . for that they gave him the coup poudre--a magical drug . . . made him a zombie, or tried to . . ."

For the first time that night, Gorman laughed. The woman's eyes flared once more in the moonlight.

"Laugh if you want," she said, "but I know that many Voodoo men on this island have the power to do just that . . ."

"To raise the dead . . ." chuckled Gorman.

"No, you stupid fool . . . not to raise the dead. The drug they administer doesn't kill--well, not usually. It just paralyzes the nerve functions. The man looks dead, though he really isn't . . . then the 'corpse' is dug up later, and another drug is administered . . . one that restores bodily functions, but deadens the subject's will. Then the bokor can use the guilty one for labor, to do the witch doctor's bidding . . ."

"You mean use the victim as a slave!" ejaculated Gorman.

"You doan understand . . . the victim is a malefactor . . . a criminal . . . he has been judged guilty

of a crime . . . judged by the whole community . . ."

"Bah!" Gorman shot back, "this isn't justice . . . Vidoq had a young daughter to take care of . . . she's alone now, what about her?" It was then that Gorman blanched, remembering the white girl. He grabbed the black woman's arms and shook her.

"Mimi Vidoq . . . what's happened to her? If you know so much, where is she?" Gorman demanded.

The black woman's eyes fell to the ground, the fire gone out of them, and when she looked back up at the white man, Gorman could detect a trace of guilt, or shame.

"There be talk back at the village . . ." she muttered.

"What?" Gorman shouted, as he shook her again.

"Let go a' me . . ." the black woman pulled herself from Gorman's savage grasp. He released her, then repeated coldly, "I said, where is she?"

After a momentary pause, the woman answered in a low voice, "There's talk in the village . . . some say that King Samedhi took the white girl as a concubine, as punishment for her father's crime . . ."

"Punishment for her father's crimes . . ." Gorman repeated. He was practically shouting now, so great was his outrage. "She's an innocent girl . . . she's done nothing . . ." Gorman fixed his burning gaze on the black woman, who quailed at its fierceness. Then Gorman spoke, again quietly, "You call this justice . . .?"

The youth was interrupted by a sound in the night, and as Gorman turned he could see, out of the corner of his eye, that the black he had clouted just moments before was awake now, awake and fleeing into the forest.

"Damn . . . !" Gorman spat, raising his weapon. But the black woman was quicker, and she swatted the gun aside just as Gorman fired --his shot fell wide of its mark.

"Bitch," spat Gorman vehement-

ly, "I'll . . ." For an instant, Gorman fought the urge to strike the black woman, but he quickly checked his rage. "No . . ." the white man said to himself. He looked into the forest, toward the direction the Haitian had fled. Then speaking to no one in particular, Gorman said, "I'll trail that bastard, and he'll lead me to King Samedhi . . . I'll rescue Mimi, or die trying . . . I'll not leave a white woman in the hands of those black savages!"

At his side, the young woman winced at Gorman's insult, but the man, gripped by violent passion, did not notice. Instead, he turned to the Negress once more, and spoke.

"Go back down to the village-- now! At dawn, bring some men back and bury the Frenchman again. Bury him deep. I'll go to Samedhi, I'll get the girl, and I'll take her from this hell-hole if it's the last thing I do!"

With that, Gorman turned and quickly melted into the dark forest, moving in the direction of the distant drum that still throbbed in the night. The black woman watched as the white man was swallowed by the darkness. She shivered once, then turned her steps toward the lights of the village below.

* * * *

Hours later, Gorman caught up with his quarry. Minutes after he had entered the dark forest beside the graveyard, the American stumbled upon a path, hidden in the dense foliage. The Voodoo men had used this concealed path to gain access to the burial grounds without attracting undue attention. Gorman could plainly follow, under the tropical moon, the tracks of the bare-foot Haitians that led deeper into the jungle, toward the ceaseless throbbing of the drums of the bizan-go.

Now, John Gorman crouched behind a thick covering of bush, gazing down at a scene of savage splendor. Below him, in a large pit, obviously man-made, lighted by a dozen braziers and a huge bonfire, was the hounfour, the secret meet-

ing place of the bizango. There, in Gorman's range of vision, fifteen men and women held conclave. They danced and leaped in wild abandon to the barbaric rhythm of the cata, the seconde and the maman, the drums used in the Voodoo ceremony, and the rattle of the asson, the sacred calabash. Along a raised ledge that ran around the full-length of the pit were stacked dozens of barrels, no doubt filled with the very rum that set the events of this night in motion.

But Gorman's eyes were drawn to the center of the pit, where sat a huge throne constructed of human bones, about which were piled a hundred human skulls. Seated in that grisly chair, a bloated mound of flesh festooned in beads and feathers and clutching a staff crowned with a human head, laughed and guzzled rum from a hollow gourd. This, without doubt, was King Samedhi, the empereur of the secret Voodoo society of the region. Behind the chief, partially hidden by the grisly throne, Gorman noticed a hint of white in that sea of darkness. He rose slightly, shifting his position.

Then he saw her, Mimi Vidoq, her naked white arms gripped by two black bucks, their taloned fingers digging into her soft skin. The woman was stripped of most of her European clothes; only her scanty white, lacy undergarments, which were soiled and torn by the rough treatment she had undoubtedly been subjected to, remained. Her small conical breasts were bare, the pink tips visible in the firelight, and Gorman could see her breasts were scratched and bloody. The youth could clearly discern the tear-stained face of the young girl, her blue eyes wide with fear and loathing. The two blacks were dragging her before King Samedhi, and as they approached the throne they hurled the girl to her knees roughly. She cowered there, on the ground, her delicate features hidden by her loose yellow hair. She vainly sought to cover her nakedness with her tiny hands.

Even at this distance, her sobs were clearly audible.

Gorman shook with rage. He was helpless. He had only one weapon and no additional ammunition. Yet he could not stand idly by and see a woman of his race, even the daughter of the man who cheated him, treated in this manner by brutish savages. But now there appeared a second woman, beautiful like the first, but more mature . . . and black, her exposed flesh gleaming like molten lava in the firelight as she danced with the elemental fury of the true savage. Her swirling limbs, clad only in bits of bone and leopard-hide, formed a mesmerizing cyclone of primal voluptuousness. Gorman somehow managed to catch a glimpse of her features. They were flushed with the ecstasy of Voodoo possession but recognizable nonetheless--Jessie Brown! She had learned the primitive rites of her people well!

Gorman dared not imagine what foul ritual was about to ensue, but he knew it must involve an unthinkable role for little Mimi. His mind raced furiously, seeking a means to rescue the woman. So deep were his thoughts that he did not notice the movement behind him until a calloused black hand grabbed him by the neck, and a voice from below cut the night. Jessie had ceased her mad gyrations; she now pointed to where Gorman stood struggling.

"Father, King Samedhi . . . a blanc be here watchin'"

Gorman was lifted to his feet by powerful arms and thrust head-first against the bole of a tree. A machete was jammed against his neck. For an instant his head spun from the clout, then the American exploded into action. Gorman, in a desperate move, kicked his foot back. With more luck than skill, he felt his booted heel smash against the black's groin. The Negro gasped as he doubled over, the air shooting from his lungs. The American turned and grabbed the wrist of the man's blade hand, twisting once. There was a loud snap as the

Negro's wrist shattered. The machete fell from the black's limp grip. Gorman grabbed the black, who was screaming now, by the scruff of his bull neck and wrapped his other arm about the man's leg. With a grunt of effort, Gorman lifted the struggling brute and walked to the edge of the pit, in plain sight of the astonished throng below.

The man struggled in Gorman's grasp, then screamed in fear as the American hurled him over the edge of the pit. One short yelp followed by the crash of splintering wood far below as the huge black slammed into the kegs that lined the pit, rupturing some and spilling their contents on the crowd below.

Gorman knew the jig was up, and decided his best course of action was boldness. He pulled his six-shooter from the belt and pointed it squarely at the vast belly of King Samedhi.

"All right, you fat black pig . . . give me the girl!" Gorman shouted with much more confidence than he felt.

For a second, all was quiet at the camp. The drums were silent for the first time since Gorman had heard them back at the graveyard. The blacks below were immobile; most looked to their bokor for leadership, not daring to move. The king's witch-daughter had vanished.

Gorman could see the blue eyes of the white girl looking up at him, filled with newborn hope. Then, a harsh sound grated in the night. It was the sound of savage laughter bubbling on the gross lips of King Samedhi.

Some of the other Haitians began to laugh as well, all watching the American. But it was the eyes of Mimi Vidoq, as they widened in dread and spectral fear, that provided John Gorman with a warning. He turned away from the pit looking over his shoulder--to face a score of blank-eyed emaciated forms in ragged clothes approaching him slowly. Zombies!

Gorman, his gaze never leaving the creatures as they closed in on

him, reached down and snatched up the machete dropped by his attacker. He waved the blade threateningly, swishing it before the staring eyes of the dirty, ragged creatures. They did not seem to notice, so intent were they on surrounding their prey.

His back to the pit, the creatures coming nearer and nearer, Gorman was still loathe to injure any of the unfortunates, for he remembered that these pitiful creatures were not the walking dead, but mere victims--victims of King Samedhi. Gorman chanced a quick glance down into the pit. Mimi was on her feet now, unnoticed by the blacks, whose eyes were all turned on the American and his foes. Gorman's attention returned to the creatures once more as the clawed hands of the foremost zombie raked the air near his face. From the abyss, Gorman heard the voice of King Samedhi . . .

"So, blanc, you bear witness to the pwinn--the living power of King Samedhi . . . you meet his combite of zombi cadavre . . . my slaves . . . kill him, my zombi . . . kill the blanc . . ."

A strong grip closed about the American's wrist, and he lashed out once with his left hand, which now clutched the gun. The zombie released Gorman's wrist, dazed for a second by the clout dealt it by the gunbutt, but after a pause the thing came on again. Gorman was surrounded now. He cast about for a way out. He remembered the look of hope that was extinguished in Mimi's eyes with her first sight of the creatures, and he lashed out again, this time using the blade. Blood jetted as the nearest zombie's head leapt from its shoulders. The corpse jerked once and pitched lifeless to the grassy sward, but three more zombies moved in to take its place.

Gorman ducked under a clumsy swing of another of the things, and while it was off balance, the American planted his foot on the small of the creature's back and kicked it into the pit. It flailed its arms

wildly as it crashed into the kegs below. Gorman lashed out again with the machete, cutting the legs out from under another of the glassy-eyed slaves. It, too, fell into space. As more kegs splintered below, the American ran the machete clean through the heart of a zombie. It stopped, to look in a puzzled manner at the hideous wound, before sinking slowly to the ground. Another swing, and a second headless zombie plunged onto the barrels below with a loud crash.

Then the creatures hesitated, and Gorman could hear confused sounds welling up from the pit below. He risked a quick look, and saw two black men running toward the area just below him that was hidden from view by the lip of the pit. . . . Gorman moved forward slightly to see what caused the commotion.

It was Mimi! She had used the confusion to sneak away unnoticed, and was already halfway up the edge of the pit, climbing a crude wooden ladder while looking fearfully over her shoulder at the blacks who had risen in pursuit. Gorman felt icy fingers close about his neck, and turned to face a foolhardy creature that had grabbed him while his attention was on the girl. The thing's grip was weak, and the American broke free, though the ragged fingernails of the creature tore the soft flesh of his throat to ribbons. Gorman cried out in rage and pain and brought the machete down in a silvery arch, splitting the skull of the zombie to the teeth. As the creature dropped, the remaining slaves of King Samedhi backed slowly away from the armed man.

Gorman faced the pit once more, just as one of the blacks reached the ladder in pursuit of the white woman. Before he could climb, however, a well-placed bullet from Gorman's gun drilled his forehead. The white man's second shot dropped another running black, but his headlong rush continued and he struck the ladder just as Mimi's small hands were reaching over the

edge of the pit. The woman screamed once, and her nails dug into the soft earth, clutching at the lip of the hole as the ladder was knocked out from under her feet.

In an instant, Gorman was there, and as Mimi's grasping fingers slipped in the moist grass, the American dropped the machete and grabbed the woman's wrist, hauling her up one-handed as she dangled helplessly over the abyss.

Then the man heard a shot fired from below, and a bullet wizzed past Gorman's ear, to strike one of the zombies creeping up from behind. The creature, mortally wounded, fell past Gorman to follow the others of its kind into the pit. But this time the corpse overshot the ledge and smashed into one of the many braziers that lit the encampment, scattering hot, burning coals all about. As the American pulled the hysterical woman toward him, there was a loud whoosh and a flash of heat that singed Gorman's dark hair. . . . one of the burning coals had ignited the volatile alcohol from the broken casks!

The flames raced along the ledge, fed by pools of contraband rum that leaked from the shattered casks, exploding the unbroken barrels with loud reports. Gorman could hear the screams of agony emanating from the bizango cultists as they perished in flames below. In seconds, the pit was a blazing inferno.

Gorman pulled the sobbing girl away from the edge of the abyss, looking over his shoulder as he did so. The few zombie slaves that remained seemed confused. They stood staring questioningly into the fire for a few moments, then turned slowly to wander off, silent and unspeaking, into the dark forest. The man soothed the young girl, who pulled him closer to her. And as the fire raged on, she slipped into merciful unconsciousness.

Gorman draped her almost naked form with his seaman's coat, tucked the six-shooter into his belt, and rose to his feet. He hefted the

blood-smeared machete for an instant, then in disgust, threw the blade into the conflagration below. He looked down once more at the woman, peacefully sleeping at his feet.

It was then that a horrible stench, not rising from the fires below, assailed Gorman's nostrils. Before he could seek its origin, a rough, leathery arm closed about Gorman's neck. Instinctively, he reached up and grabbed the corded arm that quickly tightened, cutting off his breath. Gorman's fingers dug deep into the smelly flesh, and he pulled. He felt the skin peel from the appendage, bringing with it moist fat and muscle . . . then the American heard a loud snap from behind him, and he was free. He swallowed a great gulp of air and, still gripping the oddly limp arm, he turned around.

Facing him, clearly etched in the blazing firelight, was the nightmare figure of a zombie . . . this was no drugged but living slave, but a true zombie, a walking dead man! The rotting, mottled flesh barely covered the corpse, and it gaped open in many places, revealing putrefying organs that bulged out and hung loosely. The zombie moved with a dry, cracking sound, like the joints of an incredibly aged man. Gorman momentarily froze, victim to his inherited Celtic superstitious dread. As he gazed in horror at the thing, its lipless mouth gaped open and a rotten, liver-colored tongue lolled out. One of its eyeballs was entirely glazed over and gleamed whitely. The other eye was burning with malevolence as its emaciated arm reached out and grabbed Gorman by his singed hair, its ragged nails raking his face.

From somewhere in the surrounding bush, Gorman heard the triumphant cackling of Jessie Brown, "Now white man, you will learn the real power of my people's ancient wisdom! Like this creature, it reaches out with iron talons from the distant, dead past to destroy you!"

For a moment, Gorman thought he still held the creature, until he realized that the zombie's arm that had encircled his neck had actually broken off in the struggle, and he still gripped the gory thing in his hands. With a cry of repugnance he threw the arm to the ground and tore free of the zombie's grasp, leaving a hank of his hair in the thing's bony grip. Gorman stepped back and drew his six-shooter, and pumped the remaining three shots point-blank into the monster's abdomen. Gouts of flesh and splinters of bone flew from the thing, but, inexorably, it came on. The adventurer stepped back again, until he could feel the still form of the Frenchwoman at his feet and the heat of the blaze at the small of his back.

Gorman halted—he could retreat no further. Then, as a look of rage blackened his features, John Gorman dropped his useless firearm and bunched his scarred right hand. As the zombie grabbed at him with its one good arm, the adventurer swung his right in a savage punch that carried the full weight of the man's body with it. With a sound like the crunch of a rotten gourd, Gorman's fist landed squarely against the jaw of the creature.

The zombie's rotten vertebrae snapped as its head tore loose. Gorman's blow had split the monster's skull like an over-ripe gourd, filling the air with noxious vapor that smelled of putrefied brains. The living corpse wavered, its head dangling hideously between its shoulder blades by strings of decayed flesh, dripping great gouts of gore that splattered the green sward at its feet. The thing took a floundering half-step more, tripping over the unconscious woman that lay upon the ground, and then plunged blindly into the inferno below. Its mistress, again, was nowhere to be seen.

* * * *

As the sun rose in the east, John Gorman stepped onto the dusty road that lead to the village, still

carrying the insensible woman who was wrapped in his sailor's coat. He was a terrible figure, his throat and face gashed and caked with dried blood, his hair and clothes singed and torn. In his scarred right hand he carried the now-empty six-shooter.

As he stumbled down the hill into the town, the American passed a party of Haitians carrying picks and shovels and ambling toward the cemetery. They were led by Jessie Brown, dressed once more in her riding pants and cotton shirt. She gaped wide-eyed when she saw Gorman and the girl still alive.

Gorman trudged through the

village, which was awakening to a new day. The natives opened a way for the white man to pass. Without stopping, Gorman reached the pier and leapt aboard his ketch. He gently laid the girl on the deck, and she stirred in her troubled sleep to mumble frightened sounds. Gorman bent low and comforted the woman with soft words, then, when she lay quiet once more, he cast off.

He did not bother to start the engine, but pushed away from the pier and unfurled the black sail; the better to catch the morning breeze that would carry the man and woman away from these benighted shores forever.

The Love of Oloana

By Manly Wade Wellman

It was one of the smallest pools of that dense, semi-tropic forest of the Ancient World, a dark jewel over which boughs and vines laced into a green, arched ceiling. The girl turned over lazily on its ripply surface, swam three strong, slow strokes to the brink, and waded out.

Her tanned, glistening body might intrigue even a modern eye. Richly, delectably curved at shoulders, breasts and thighs, she was formed for deep warmth of love. Formed, too, for ideal motherhood of a race--a strong race that might some day conquer even the mammoth and the sabre-tooth tiger and emerge from the darkness of the Stone Age into mastery of the whole wild planet. First she donned her single garment of soft fur, that fell below like a shirt skirt from waist to mid-thigh, while above it looped over one round shoulder to hide half the generous swell of her breasts. Next she slipped her slender foot into sandals of deer-hide. On one round arm she fastened a sort of bracelet, made of small shells strung together. Finally she fumbled in a belt-pouch, brought out a saw-tooth comb crudely carved from horn, and, leaning against a half-rotten stump, began to untangle her great, damp clouds of blue-black hair.

Oloana, girl of the Stone Age, feared nothing. The fierce hunters of her tribe had long ago driven the beasts of prey from this part of their forest. As for human menaces, who would dare molest the daughter of the head chief and the beloved of the most celebrated warrior? Who would dare so much as look at her, for all her smouldering beauty?

Yet someone was looking. He lounged apeline in a tree-fork overhead, lithe and lean and cord-muscled as the leopard whose pelt he

had taken for a loin-cloth. Unlike Oloana's dark kinsmen, he boasted a shock of lion-tawny hair, cut shoulder length and bound at the brows by a snakeskin fillet. His face, plucked clean of beard according to custom of his own far-off people, was not tanned but freckled. The scar of some bygone adventure seamed his rugged young cheek, adding sternness to his good looks. He wore moccasins instead of sandals, and the sharp-ground stone heads of his axe and javelin were of a make unknown in that forest. He was Hok--Hok the Mighty--an adventurer from the open country to the north, now drinking in the fairest sight on all his travels.

His blue fighter's eyes sparkled with delight as they lingered on the charms of the dark girl. His wide mouth spread wider in an admiring grin. His big hands trembled, as if eager to clutch and hold. Was ever such a girl? No, not among all the tribes he had visited. He wanted her. And to want, with Hok the mighty, was to take.

He twitched the javelin free from its leather loop at his shoulder. Noiselessly he rose erect on his perch, drew back his arm in a lithe gesture, and cast the shaft.

It yelped in the air, then thudded into the stump. Oloana screamed in sudden terror and tried to spring away. No! The stone head of the javelin, driving deep into the wood, had pinned fast her scanty skirt. Even as she struggled a triumphant laugh rang above her. A long-limbed demon with blazing blue eyes fell out of the branch-filled sky and seized her.

"Mine!" he cried, in a language similar to her own.

She screamed again and struck at him. Her fist rang on a chest as hard as wood. He laughed the

louder, drew her close and plucked away the tight-wedged javelin as easily as a man of today would gather a flower. Still struggling and shouting in fear and anger, she felt herself tossed lightly onto his broad shoulder. And then he ran.

For another, deeper shout answered Oloana, and then more shouts. Her people--the dark forest men--had heard and were coming. Hope thrilled the girl as she fought to get free. But Hok only chuckled and fled the faster.

Louder came the pursuing cries. Racing men were visible now through the thickets and trees behind--yelling, black-bearded, fierce.

"No arrows!" bellowed one great voice, the voice of Oloana's chieftain father. "You might kill her. Catch him!"

"We have him!" bawled another --Kimri, the giant who was to marry Oloana. "He's running toward the ravine!"

It was true--a narrow, ancient crack had cut deeply into the forest floor, and there the thief must come to a halt. Oloana ceased her cries. In half a dozen seconds her ravisher would be brought to bay, struck down, and herself rescued. Even as she exulted in the thought, she heard his sharp exclamation of surprise as the ravine, a good thirty feet across and fifty deep, came into sight.

But he did not slacken his pace. Once more she screamed, screamed her loudest, as Hok raced to the very brink of the chasm and sprang out over it.

For one horror-stricken moment she gazed down at the rock-torn current far below. But they did not fall. A shock--her despoiler's free hand had made a lightning clutch upon a dangling vine. Their weight carried them floating onward, upward, while the far bank rushed to meet them. His feet found the brink, he let go the vine and he tottered there for a moment while she gazed backward into the depths with wide eyes. Then he found solid footing and turned for a mo-

ment to shout mockeries.

The black-beards lined the other side, cursing and raving. Several aimed arrows or spears. Hok laughed and swung Oloana's squirming body in front of him.

"No arrows!" commanded the chief again, his thundering voice full of anxiety. "Cross after him."

"No man dares the leap," taunted Hok.

"I will follow!" screamed Kimri, towering among his fellows, hoarse with rage. "I will follow and take her back."

"Follow, then," laughed Hok, and plunged anew into the depths of the forest.

For hours his tireless lope ate up the miles. Oloana had ceased to struggle, for struggling was useless. She knew now that she was in strange country--her own part of the forest was left far behind. Just when she wondered if her captor would ever grow weary, he halted abruptly and lowered her from his shoulder, setting her feet on the earth but still holding her by the wrist. She found herself in a little clearing among birch trees, with a murmuring trickle of water crossing it and, to one side, a low, rocky mound with a cave in it.

"We stay here tonight," said Hok in a voice of authority.

Her eyes cast fire of hatred at him, and her full, golden-brown breasts rose and fell with each tempestuous breath as she probed her mind for insults fierce enough.

"You dared steal me!" she gritted at him.

He made a careless gesture with his free hand. "You are a woman," he said, as if that explained everything. "I am a man. My name is Hok."

"A man?" she repeated in biting scorn. "A man, with no beard?"

"The men of my tribe pluck out their beards with clam-shell tweezers," he explained.

"Your face is the face of a boy. Kimri will follow us. He will crush your skull like a toadstool."

"Let him try," said Hok. "Come into the cave."

"I won't!"

He lifted her lightly from her feet and carried her in.

She screamed once more, though she knew help was far away. Her flying fists glanced from his chest and face like hailstones from a cliff-side. He laid her gently on the rocky floor, easily pinning her struggling body with one hand. The other hand slid caressingly over her cheek, down to her shoulder, then further to imprison one of her trembling breasts. She tried to strike it away from her body; she might as well have tried to uproot an oak tree.

"You are beautiful," he said softly. "What is your name?"

She did not answer, but fought as fiercely and futilely as ever. His imprisoning arm slid around her and drew her close to him, pressing her thighs, belly, bosom against his hard flesh. He slipped the strap of her garment from her shoulder and began to peel the fur casing from her body like the rind from some delicious fruit.

In desperation she bit his shoulder until the blood came. He did not cry out, did not flinch even. She knew then that she was beaten.

Deep night found a blazing fire at the mouth of the cave. Lying across the opening, Hok was grilling bits of a slaughtered bird on the end of a stick. He drew the meat from the flame, studied it with the practised eye of a skilful bachelor cook, then offered the choicest morsel to Oloana.

"Eat," he urged.

She gazed at him from where she crouched in the farthest corner. Her big, tear-filled eyes gleamed in the firelight.

"You will not let me go?" she pleaded.

He laughed and shook his tawny head. "You are mine. I am tired of my own people, and I do not want to live alone. You are the only woman I ever wanted. We can be the father and mother of a new tribe."

"A new tribe?" she murmured,

and began to creep toward him.

"Yes. You have not told me your name yet."

"Oloana," she breathed, and came to his very side.

"Oloana." He savored the word.

"It is beautiful. Will you--"

Out flew her hand. Next moment she had caught his javelin from where it leaned beside him at the cave-mouth, whirled it and plunged it straight toward her own heart. Hok's fist darted like the head of a snake. Deflected, the sharp point of the weapon slid off across the polished globe of one breast, leaving a jagged thread of blood. A moment later he had disarmed her and clutched her close.

"You might have killed yourself," he scolded.

She burst into new tears. "I will kill myself," she wailed. "I hate you. I hate your love. As soon as you let go of me I will kill myself."

He tore from his shoulder the strap in which he slung his javelin. Pulling her wrists together, he bound them deftly. Still she glared through her tears.

"My feet are free to run away!" she cried, and, springing up, darted from the cave and leaped across the fire. But before she had run half a dozen steps he had overtaken her and dragged her back.

"There are tigers in this part of the forest," he warned her. "They would eat you."

"Let them," she cried passionately. "I hate you!"

Back in the cave again, he took the thong that served him for a belt and bound her ankles also. She lay helpless but tameless, her face dark with rage and dislike.

He held a bit of the savory meat to her lips, but she turned her head away.

"You will not eat?" he queried, but she did not answer.

Hok twined his corded arms around his updrawn knees and gazed at her in perplexity.

"I wanted you," he said, a little querulously. "I thought you would

want me, too."

She spat at him for reply, then rolled over and closed her eyes.

"Sleep, then," he conceded. "I will sleep, too--upon my weapons."

In the morning he woke to find Oloana propping herself up on her bound hands to stare at him with unforgiving eyes.

"Let me untie you," he offered at once.

"I'll kill myself," she replied, her voice as bitter as the night before.

"Don't kill yourself, Oloana." He moved quickly to her side and gathered her into his arms. She made no move, either of resistance or surrender, only lay quiescent and hated him with her gaze.

"Can't you love me?" he half-pleaded. His immense hands, powerful enough to rend the tines from a deer's antlers, quested over her smooth, soft body. She quivered at their touch. Was it a throb of delight, awakened in spite of her professed hate of him? Or was it a cringe of fearful loathing? Hok, simple hunter that he was, had no way of knowing. He released her and let her sink back to the floor.

"You must be thirsty," he suggested. "I'll bring you water."

Walking out into the clearing, he stooped to pick a half-dried gourd from a spreading vine. Deftly breaking it in half, he cleansed the withered pulp from one cup-like piece and filled it at the brook. Carrying it back, he offered it to Oloana. She said nothing and when he held it to her mouth she jerked her head away as before, spilling the water on her face and breast.

"You do not eat or drink, Oloana," he said. "You will die."

"Let me die, then," she snapped.

He made no reply, but considered her for a long time. Finally he rumbled his hair in perplexity and went to sit outside.

Things were not going as he had hoped. Oloana had been the incarnation of his primitive dreams when first he had seen her. And

in his arms last night she had thrilled him even beyond those dreams--the more so because she had fought him and he had been the stronger. But now what?

She was not submitting. She was not even enduring. She would fight always, revile him always. Given a chance, she would kill herself--and Hok did not want that.

What would it be like, life with a sullen, hateful woman, a woman who must always go tied for fear she would run away, must be guarded lest she turn his spear on herself? And could even the closest guarding prevent her? Hok suddenly saw a vision--Oloana no longer vibrant with glorious life but still and voiceless, her eyes suddenly empty of light and hate, her brown skin gone dull, and blood flowing from where, through her heart, was thrust his javelin. He dashed the back of his hand across his brow to drive out the picture. So vivid had it been that he whirled and stared into the gloom. She lay there, still bound, still resentful.

"I hate you," she flung at him.

He strode in, stooped and drew her to her feet. His hands caught the leather that bound her wrists, his muscles suddenly swelled and cracked, his breath came in a single explosive pant. Then the cord broke. Bending, he hooked his great fingers under the thong around her ankles. A heave and a tug and that, too, tore apart.

"I shall run," she warned him.

"Run, then, Oloana," he replied.

She drew herself up, statue-still in amazement.

"I thought I had you," he tried to explain. "I carried you here and tied you up. But I do not have you." The words died in his throat and his forehead crinkled at the paradox. "You hate me, Oloana. Go."

"You do not want me now?" she challenged him.

His hands grasped her shoulders, then slid to her flanks, gripping her soft flesh so strongly that she almost whimpered. Their eyes

were close to each other. His blazing stars fastened upon her sulky mouth, as full and red as some jungle fruit. How sweet that fruit would taste, he suddenly thought. His face darted down at hers, their lips crushed together for a whirling moment. Clumsy, savage, unpredictable, it was perhaps the first kiss in the history of the human race.

Then, still more abruptly, he spun on nimble feet and fairly raced out of the cave, out of the clearing, into the unknown, untracked forest, with a heart in which he seemed to carry the heat of Oloana's eyes, the heat of her breath, the heat of her fruit-red lips.

But he did not run far. Somehow it had been easier to run the day before, for all his struggling burden of loveliness. Hok lagged. His troubled eyes sought the ground. His feet took him where they wished.

The day and the miles wore away, like rock under falling water. Twice or thrice he gathered a handful of berries to eat and found them like dust in his mouth. He drank at tinkling springs, then spewed out the water as if it were brackish. Once he saw a wild pig rooting in a thicket, and felt for his javelin. Then he remembered that he had left it in the cave. He had left Oloana there, too. His brows drew together in troubled sorrow. He could get another javelin; but he could never get another Oloana.

It was nearly evening. He walked slowly down a game-lane. Then something huge and swarthy flashed from behind a tree and flung itself upon him.

On the instant Hok was fighting for his life. One glimpse he caught of that distorted, black-bearded face before they grappled --Kimri, the baffled giant who had sworn to follow him and take Oloana back. Hok's leopard-lithe arms whipped around his adversary's huge body, crushing it like twin pythons. Hok's tawny head bored with deadly force into the great black beard, driving under Kimri's

jaw and forcing it upward and back. The dark man of the forest was the biggest of the two but not the best --a moment later Hok curved his heel back of the other's and threw his whole might forward. Down they went with a crash, Kimri underneath, while Hok's clutching fingers drove through the tangles of beard and closed on the bull-like throat beneath.

"You came to find Oloana," he snarled, swelling with the first joy he had known that day. "You find --death!"

Kimri had only breath for one strangled yell. His writhing face purpled as he tore at the garrotting grip and his great body squirmed and floundered in an effort to dislodge the man on top. Hok laughed grimly, his teeth stripped to the gum in a triumphant fighting grin as he burrowed his thumbs deeper into the flesh of Kimri's neck.

But a flurry of feet drummed up behind Hok. Two steely hands hooked under his chin from the rear. He bit a finger to the bone, heard his new assailant howl, and next moment was yanked bodily backward and away from the half-dead Kimri. As he tumbled he whirled cat-like, got his feet under him and rose to face a second black-beard. At the same moment something shot forward to prick his chest over the heart--a foot-long dagger of bone, sharp as a needle.

"Move!" dared the newcomer. Hok saw that it was Oloana's father, chief of the forest men. "Move--and die!"

Kimri also struggled up, gasping and holding a hand to his bruised throat. He caught up his fallen axe and raised it aloft to cleave Hok's skull.

"No!" barked the father of Oloana. "The rope!"

At the voice of authority Kimri gained control of himself and whipped from his girdle a coil of rawhide line. Quickly he flung a loop of it over Hok's shoulders, jerked it tight, then ran the rest of it round and round, pinioning

the prisoner's arms to his body. In half a minute Hok was as helpless as Oloana had been a few hours ago.

"Now," said the chief, "where is Oloana?"

"Hok shook his head.

"Speak!" snarled Kimri, and struck Hok's mouth with his horny palm. Blood sprang to the bruised lips, but Hok grinned.

"A woman's blow," he mocked. "Untie me and I will take the hand from your body like a berry from a bush."

"Where is Oloana?" repeated the chief.

"I do not know. I set her free."

"You lie!" raged Kimri. "Tell us where you have hidden her."

"I have not hidden her. She must be halfway home by now."

"Tell us," Kimri insisted, "or we will kill you."

"You will kill me anyway," said Hok.

Foam flecked Kimri's beard, and he flourished his axe again. But once more the chief intervened.

"It is nearly night," he told his companion. "We will camp. He can think until morning. Then," and he grinned significantly at Hok, "if he still is silent, I will do tricks with hot coals."

They herded him through the trees for nearly a mile. In a grove at the edge of a brush-faced bluff they came to a halt, shoved their prisoner violently down at the foot of a big tree and tethered him between two gnarled roots with the free end of the rawhide. Then Kimri kindled a fire with rubbing sticks. Over its blaze the chief set slices of venison to broil.

Dark came. The two captors ate and talked in low tones. Several times they glanced toward Hok, but said nothing to him. Finally both stretched and yawned. Kimri came to the big tree, examined the knots that bound Hok, and finally gave him a hearty kick.

"Tomorrow you will talk," he prophesied balefully, and returned to the fire. The two forest men built it up with great billets of hard wood that would burn for a long

time. Then they lay down and fell into the quick, healthy slumber of wild things.

Hok did not sleep. He tried his bonds, cautiously at first and then with all his magnificent strength, but the rope was of sound rawhide and passed many times around his body. Not even he could burst it.

He must lie there, then, and think. Think of Oloana and her beauty, and of how he had failed to win her. With the dawn his enemies would wake and question him again. The chief had hinted of fire-torture. And he, Hok, could truly tell them nothing. He could only bear the pain, give them scornful smiles and curses. If lucky, he might taunt them into finishing him quickly. He hoped so.

He dozed fitfully for a time, then started awake. What was that? He felt, rather than heard, the stealthy approach of two furtive feet. The flickering fire suddenly cast a bright tongue skyward, and he saw the newcomer--a woman, crowned with clouds of midnight hair, dressed in scanty fur that could not hide the rich beauty of her body. He knew that body. How could he forget? Oloana had tracked him down.

She bent to look at Kimri, at her father. Another tongue of flame rose, and by its light she saw Hok. She tiptoed toward him. Her right hand lifted--his javelin.

Kneeling, she slid her other hand across his chest to where his great heart beat beneath two crossed strands of rawhide. Hok looked into her eyes and smiled. If she but knew that she was cheating her father and Kimri--if she knew how they would rage when they found him quickly slain and beyond torture! The levelled point came down, down. He braced himself as it pricked his skin. Then--

The rawhide relaxed its hold on him. A strand parted, another and another, before the keen flint edge of the javelin-head. Wondering, he stood up, free and chafing his cramped wrists and forearms. She cautioned him to silence with finger

on lips. Together they stole toward the edge of the bluff.

Oloana, going first, brushed against twigs that crackled.

Next instant Kimri's awakening roar smote their ears. Hok whirled to meet the rushing giant, while Oloana sped like a deer down the steep slope. A charge and a grasp, and the two who wanted Oloana were straining and heaving in each other's arms. A moment later they tripped, fell, and went spinning over and over down the declivity.

At the bottom they flew sprawling apart, rose and circled watchfully. Kimri's hand sought the haft of his dagger. "Come on and fight," Hok dared him.

But even as Kimri gathered himself to spring he started, stiffened, the wrath on his hairy face gave way to blank surprise. A moment later he pitched forward and lay still. Oloana, behind him, wrenched her javelin out of his back. She looked apologetically at Hok.

"You were strongest, I know," she pleaded. "I only wanted to

help."

From the top of the bluff sounded her father's yells for Kimri. Hok put out his hand for the javelin.

"No," she said, holding it out of his reach. "He is my father. Let us run away."

In a far thicket Hok coaxed a fire from rubbing-sticks. Together they lounged in its warm light, their backs to a boulder.

"Oloana," he now found time to ask, "why did you follow me? I thought--"

"Yes," she nodded happily, "I, too, thought I hated you. But before you left me, free and alone, you--" She paused, seeking words.

"What did I do?" he prompted.

"This!" Her round arms twined around his neck. Her lips pressed his. It was, probably, the second kiss in history.

"You liked it?" he started to ask, but the words were smothered by the third kiss. Gathering her half-naked loveliness close to him, he joyfully stopped talking.

Copyright © 1986

"Intrigue in Kurdistan" by Mrs. P. M. Keykendall

"The Blade of the Slayer" by Richard L. Tierney

"The Dark Circle" by Carl Jacobi

"The Love of Oloana" by Mrs. Frances Wellman

Cover art by Stephen E. Fabian

All other material by

Cryptic Publications

Robert M. Price, Editor

107 East James Street

Mount Olive, North Carolina 28365

AMAZING STORIES

APRIL
25 Cents



**A
COSMIC
JUKEBOX
SCAN**

